

**Battered Women in Muslim Communities in the Western Cape:  
Religious Constructions of Gender, Marriage, Sexuality and Violence**

by

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## DEDICATION

To  
the memory of Fatima Mohammad,  
.....and never again.

## ABSTRACT

[Historically Muslim women have been marginalised in the examination of Islamic texts and Muslim society. This has resulted in the non-recognition and silencing of women's perspectives as well as the [concealment of some of the traumatic realities experienced by groups of Muslim women. Exacerbated by pervading social and religious notions of "private" families, the incidence of wife battery within Muslim societies have been largely hidden.] Violence against wives is seen as the manifestation of a sexist and patriarchal ideology. This study examines the manner in which Islamic gender discourses inform and impact upon the phenomenon of violence against women. The related tensions between patriarchal and egalitarian Islamic perspectives are explored.

This study involves a two-fold feminist analysis of gender ideology in religious texts and contemporary Muslim society. At the level of textual studies, I applied a feminist hermeneutic to medieval and contemporary Qur'ānic exegetical literature. The examination of medieval period focused on the exegesis of Abū Jāfar Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (839-922), Abū al-Qāsim Maḥmūd b. 'Umar Zamaksharī (1075-1144), Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (1149-1210). The study of contemporary exegetical literature concentrated on the approaches and exegeses of Fazlur Rahman and Amina Wadud-Muhsin. Hermeneutical debates on violence against



wives were focused on the interpretations of the Qur'anic notion of female *nushūz* (Q.4:34).

In examining contemporary Muslim society, I employed feminist qualitative research methodology. I interviewed a number of women from a South African Muslim community in the Western Cape. Here, the sample consisted of eight women with whom open-ended in-depth interviews were conducted. The interviews were transcribed and thematically analysed.

I found that interweaving levels of religious symbols and discourses shaped normative understandings of gender relations. This in turn had implications for both structural and practical discourses of violence against women in Muslim societies. Islamic gender ideology spanned the continuum from patriarchal to feminist approaches. Misogynist religious understandings reinforced the husband's right to control and coerce his wife, even if this implied the use of force. On the other hand, egalitarian Islamic perspectives prioritised the Qur'anic ethics of equality and social justice and rejected the violation of women. I argue that Islam provides numerous resources for the pro-active empowerment of women and the promotion of the full humanity of women.

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## INTRODUCTION

People understand religious injunctions in many ways. Often understandings of sacred texts and religious truth are mediated by an untold number of factors which range from the historical and political context of a society to the personal and psychological development of the individual. Historically the role of Islamic scholars has been central in defining the implications of religious imperatives for human existence.

Islamic scholarship over the past fourteen centuries has been prolific and highly specialized. However, historically this discipline has primarily been the domain of men. Consequently, such scholarship has chiefly represented the experiences and worldviews of men. Hence, as I will show, there has been an undeniable historical male bias implicit in Islamic scholarship.

This bias is betrayed in many ways. Islamic male scholarship has systematically excluded the perspective and voices of half of the Muslim population, i.e., women. [It has also imposed androcentric definitions of the world by offering interpretations of sacred texts that are intrinsically sexist.] In this way orthodox Islamic discourses have been complicit in creating and maintaining a patriarchal worldview that has enjoyed hegemony in the Muslim world.

*is reinforced  
patriarchal*

I will argue in this thesis that the ideological tenets embedded in a patriarchal understanding of Islam foster a mode of gender relations and mores which practically disempower women. Such disempowerment is expressed in its most extreme form when women become the targets of religiously sanctioned male violence and aggression. The impact of religious discourses on violence against women is the central focus of my thesis.

In the present study I have two objectives. Firstly my aim is deconstructive, in that, I analyse and critique hegemonic patriarchal interpretations of gender relations and violence in the Qur'ān and in Muslim society. Secondly, my goal is reconstructive, that is, I provide alternative egalitarian and feminist interpretations and readings of gender dynamics in the Qur'ān by emphasising non-violent and non-sexist ideals for Muslim society. One of the primary means of attaining this objective is to create an avenue for the expression of battered Muslim women's perspectives and experiences. A unique contribution of this study is its capacity to draw from various disciplines in analysing the multi-faceted context of violence against Muslim women. Hence a major objective in writing this thesis is to challenge the androcentric bias of a traditional Islamic worldview and to redress the historical exclusion of women's from Islamic discourse

My motivation for writing this thesis is two-fold. Firstly my aim

is to expose and delegitimise those Islamic discourses which disempower and sanction the violation of women as unrepresentative of the revelatory and Prophetic spirit of Islam. Secondly, to demonstrate that in fact Islamic discourses provide the resources for the resistance to violence and misogyny, for liberation, transformation and the empowerment of women.

My approach to this thesis is framed by my own religious and ideological commitments and historical context. I am a committed Muslim feminist. My contextual and political identity includes my positioning as a Black South African woman. In the spirit of transparency and accountability, I self-consciously present the multiple interrelated identities and commitments that I bring to my study of the phenomenon of violence against women in Muslim communities in the Western Cape, South Africa.

In chapter one I contextualise my approach to the study of gender and women within broader feminist debates. I also situate such an inquiry in relation to the third world, the Muslim world and the South African Muslim community.

In chapter two I examine the ideological and theoretical underpinnings of violence against women, particularly focussing on the phenomenon of wife battery. Here the relationship between gender ideology, power dynamics and violence against wives is examined. I suggest that religion influences the configuration of

gendered power relations.

Chapter three and four both focus on interpretations of Qur'ānic gender ideology in relation to violence against wives. In chapter three I critically examine medieval Qur'ānic exegetical studies on a particular Qur'ānic verse (Q.4:34). I apply a feminist hermeneutic to the exegeses of authoritative medieval scholars Abū Ja'far Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (839-922), Abū al-Qāsim Maḥmūd b. 'Umar al-Zamaksharī (1075-1144) Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (1149-1210). In chapter four I present a contemporary exegetical engagement with the Qur'ān. The approaches of exegetes, Fazlur Rahman and Amina Wadud-Muhsin, provide the basis for my own reflections towards an egalitarian, transformative and non-violent Qur'ānic gender ideology.

In chapters five and six I examine the translation of Islamic gender ideology into the lives of battered women in one specific Muslim South African community, namely, the Western Cape community. Chapter five outlines the research methodology I employed in the process of interviewing battered women. In chapter six I describe and analyse the experiences of battered Muslim women derived from the interviews. Here I focus on the impact of socio-religious discourse in the construction of violence against wives. In chapter seven I provide concluding reflections and my impressions of the significance of this thesis within Islamic studies and Women's Studies.

## CHAPTER ONE

### FEMINISM AND ISLAM: COLLISION AND COLLUSION

#### 1. Introduction

This thesis is primarily concerned with a discourse of gender in Islam. A central entry point and hermeneutical tool employed in this study is a feminist analysis. Hence it engages two major discourses namely, Islam and feminism. In this chapter I commence with a preliminary operational definition of feminism and its major adversary, patriarchy. Then I proceed to outline the relevant contemporary global debates within feminism. Thirdly I offer some reflections on how these debates impact on the issues of gender in the Arab-Muslim context. Finally, I examine the South African Muslim context in terms of these debates. In sum, this chapter situates my thesis firstly, in relation to broader feminist paradigms and secondly, in the context of Islam and South Africa.

#### 1.1 Defining Feminism

The definitions of feminism have been varied and contested (de Lauretis 1986:6-8; Rowbotham 1992:6-15; Toubia 1988:xii). While I accept the premise that there is no

monolithic feminism but rather a number of feminisms, I will describe the underlying orientation and the broad ethos which the term implies. The discussion and debate around the use of the term will then be considered in some detail.

The term "feminism" comes from the Latin "*femina*", originally meaning "to have the qualities of a female" (S.O.E.D, s.v. 'feminism'). Since 1895 the term has increasingly been used to refer to the theory of sexual equality and the movement for women's rights (Tuttle 1986:107; S.O.E.D, s.v. 'feminism'). The contemporary usage of the term suggests that in addition to being a doctrine and movement for women's equal rights, it is also viewed as "an ideology of social transformation aiming to create a world for women beyond simple equality" (Humm 1989:74). This transformation of relations within society, as distinct from mere empowerment within a given status quo, is a pervading theme within a number of strands of contemporary feminism.

## 1.2 Defining Patriarchy

While the term "patriarchy" is discussed more extensively at different points within the text, a brief introductory definition is warranted here. The term literally means "the rule of the father" and was "originally used by anthropologists to describe the social structure in which

one old man (the patriarch) has absolute power over everyone else in the family" (Tuttle 1986:242).

In contemporary feminism the term "patriarchy" is used to describe systems of male authority and domination which oppress women through social, political and economic institutions (Humm 1989:159). The term is rooted in biological differences between the sexes and refers to a system of power based on male privilege and a hierarchical ordering of society (Kramarae & Treichler 1985:324). The concept of patriarchy is useful insofar as it encapsulates the notion of a comprehensive totality of structures and relations which may exploit women in a given society (Humm 1989:159).

The relationship between patriarchy and feminism is thus an ideologically adversarial one. The primary agenda of feminism is to critique and debunk patriarchal structures which promote male power and privilege. Feminism derives its ideological impetus from the principles of gender equality and social justice. It seeks to transform the world by mobilisation and resistance to women's oppression and advancing alternative ideals of justice and anti-sexism.

These preliminary and tentative definitions foreground the more complex global debates in and about feminism. The

following discussion of the debates in feminism makes no claims to be comprehensive. My purpose in outlining these debates is primarily to locate the issues of gender, Islam and feminist scholarship both internationally and within South Africa.

## **2. Global Debates in Feminism**

### **2.1. The Problem of Western Homogenization**

One of the strongest criticisms levelled at feminism is that its genesis and historical development has primarily reflected Eurocentric realities (Omolade 1985:248; Steady 1987:3-24). More specifically, this critique emerged in response to the theories proposed in Western feminist thought particularly in the late 1960's and through to the 1980's. As discussed by Barret and Phillips (1992:2-3) Western feminism at that juncture, reflected the modernist ethos in its search for **the** ultimate cause of women's oppression. These authors point out that radical differences existed among feminists in their understanding of the ultimate cause of women's oppression. Some attributed the aetiology of oppression to exploitative relations of production, others to the reproductive capacities of women and still others to discriminatory gender roles. However, within this diversity there was an underlying consensus on



the notion of singular cause. According to Barret and Phillips feminists insisted on the existence of a grand narrative, a comprehensive theory that would account for all of the overarching structural oppression of women (Ibid). The popular taxonomies of feminist theoreticians divided feminist schools into liberal, socialist and radical streams. (Rowbotham 1992:7)

The least structuralist of these approaches was the liberal feminist approach<sup>1</sup>. Central in this analysis, was the view of woman as an individual and the emphasis on the importance of freedom of choice and right to self-determination for women. Liberal feminists believed that the disempowerment of women was a result of societal prejudice and discrimination (Mill [1869] 1993:150-158). They viewed socialisation into particular roles as instrumental to women's oppression (Friedan 1983). Their solution was rooted in the ethos of the American women's suffrage movement of the 1920's; they held that gender inequality would be eradicated if women were politically empowered and received equal opportunities and education (Barret and Phillips 1992:3). According to hooks<sup>2</sup> (1984:20) "nowhere in these [liberal] demands is

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<sup>1</sup>. Two classical works which served as pioneering texts of liberal feminism are Mary Wollstonecraft's A vindication of the right's of women written in 1789 and John Stuart Mill's The subjection of women written in 1869.

<sup>2</sup>. bell hooks does not use capital letters in her name.

there an emphasis on eradicating the politics of domination". The reductionist individualism implicit in this "levelling the playing fields" approach, was criticised strongly by radical and socialist feminists (Barret and Phillips 1992:3).

Socialist feminists argued that rather than prejudice, the relations of production and exploitative capitalist class structures are responsible for the oppression of women (Meulenbelt 1984; Rowbotham 1973). In this more structuralist critique of patriarchy there was a focus on the material benefits which capitalism derived from the specific position of women within society (Jenness 1972). The women's question was viewed as intrinsically related to the socio-economic order (Mitchell 1984). Patriarchy and the capitalist mode of production were therefore seen as interdependent forces.

Radical feminism viewed the hierarchical relationship between men and women as the cause of female oppression (Daly 1978; Koedt, Levine & Rapone 1973). Patriarchy as a system of male domination, radical feminists argued, was to be opposed at the interrelated personal and political levels (Ibid). It was the radical feminists that coined the

expression "the personal is political"<sup>3</sup>. By this they suggested that the "domestic" sphere and intimate relationships between men and women involved power relations and were in fact political (Firestone 1970). Their criticism and activism focused on the areas of sexual oppression and the control and colonisation of women's bodies, sexuality, reproduction, and male violence against women (Rich 1976; Millet 1969). In its most radical expression, radical feminists viewed all men as the "enemy" and lesbianism as the only solution to the oppression of women<sup>4</sup> (Shelley 1970; Atkinson 1974; Bunch 1993)

Although the answers proposed by the varied strands of feminism were very different, there was agreement about the existence of an original cause of women's oppression. The theory of a grand single cause has subsequently been debunked from the 1980's by a number of intellectual developments.

## 2.2. A Third World Response

One such development is the critique by Third World women of

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<sup>3</sup>. The term was coined by Carol Hainisch used for the first time in her "Notes from the second year" in 1970 (Humm 1995:204)

<sup>4</sup>. In the 1970's some radical feminist collectives like the "Furies" and feminist theorists like Adrienne Rich, Charlotte Bunch Grace-Ti Atkinson echoed the phrase "feminism is the theory, lesbianism is the practice" (Humm 149:1980)

the putatively racist and ethnocentric assumptions upon which dominant strands of Western feminism were based. It may be legitimately argued that there are different voices among First World feminists since this group does not constitute a homogenous entity. Nonetheless there exists a widely held perception among Third World women that by and large the dominant trends of Western feminism have been characterised by such bias. This critique has been well recorded in a number of works by Third World women including hooks (1981, 1984); Moraga and Anzaldua (1981); Joseph and Lewis (1981); Okeya (1981); Hull, Scott & Smith (1982); Savane (1982); Smith (1983); Ong (1987); Lewis (1993).

Many Western feminist movements referred to "the" situation of women, presuming a generic "woman" and the notion of a global sisterhood. However, Third World feminists argued that this supposedly essential womanhood represented only the realities of a particular group of women, namely, First World, White, middle class women (hooks 1984; Steady 1987). Their experiences, realities and peculiar needs were presented as normative and were represented as the reference point and defining criteria of the reality of all women. Thus it was alleged that the discourses of these First World feminists were guilty of racism and classism (Johnson-Odim 1991). The universalistic conception of sisterhood, was now being challenged by women from the Third World who found

that very little of their interests or realities were accurately reflected by Western feminists (Barret & Phillips 1992:4-7).

I am in agreement with this criticism that the notion of women forming an homogeneous, ahistorical group who are universally oppressed is inaccurate and reductionist. Our criticism of this notion which serves the ideological interests of a certain group of women is based on two key arguments namely, the question of representation and the "victim" construction of women.

#### i) Representation and Mis-representation

The homogenisation paradigm enables a particular group of women to present their reality as representative for all women. An illustrative case in point is the popular classical Western feminist work "The Feminine Mystique" by Betty Friedan (1983) where she describes the plight of *women* as housewives who were put on a false pedestal, trapped into the boredom of domestic life, unfulfilled without careers. This so-called female condition that Friedan refers to, only applied to a select group of middle and upper class married White women (hooks 1984:1). The "generic" woman described by Friedan does not remotely represent women of colour or poor and working-class women who often had to work "as maids, as

babysitters, as factory workers, as clerks, or as prostitutes and did not belong to the leisure class of housewife" (Ibid:2) Hence Friedan represents a Western feminist scholarship which presents the context-bound experiences of a select group of women as a universal female experience.

This critique has relevance in South Africa where patriarchal ideology does not operate similarly on Black and White women. Many Black women are simultaneously subjected to the intersecting and interlocking systems of oppression combining gender, class and race and thus their experience of patriarchy often takes a very different form from that of White middle class women (Moodley 1993:13). For example, whereas White women have to deal with patriarchal stereotypes which construct them as submissive and physically weak, Black women do not have the class and race privilege of such stereotyping (Lewis 1993:539). In fact South African Black women were often political activists, breadwinners and heads of households in Black townships where men were absent due to politico-economic apartheid structures (Campbell 1990: 1-22).<sup>5</sup> Thus the realities of

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<sup>5</sup>. The migrant labour system in South Africa causes many Black men to leave their household in the search for employment. The effects of migrant labour include disintegrated Black families, urban prostitution, and a gender imbalance between rural and urban areas. Black women often became the heads of single-parent families and had to alone face the rigours of earning an income, raising children and maintaining a home, often under economically and

different groups of women are primarily shaped by their complex socio-economic and political positioning. The frequent non-recognition of these complexities together with the assumption of universal sisterhood by mainstream White South African feminists serves to suppress and marginalise the experiences of the majority of South African women who are Black and/or working class.

Furthermore even within Western feminist discourse about Third World women, the standards of First World women are used as the superior norms against which Third World women are measured. Often Western cultural ideals are imposed on the women coming from very different religious and cultural traditions. This point is well illustrated in popular Western understandings of the veiling of Muslim woman as symbolic of their subjugation. This interpretation misses both the particularity of such a phenomenon as well as the self-definition of groups of veiled muslim women. For example, anthropologist Fedwa el Guindi who studied veiling among women in contemporary Egyptian Islamic movements found that such women have deliberately donned the veil as an assertion of their identity:

...a new Egyptian women is emerging - educated, professional, non-elitist, and veiled. The veil is part of an assertive movement with a powerful message symbolising the beginning of a synthesis between modernity and tradition (1981:465).

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socially debilitating circumstances.

This rationale for veiling by Egyptian Muslim women is very different from dominant Western feminist presentation of veiled Muslim women as submissive beings.

The complexity of Muslim women's self-definition vis-a-vis Western feminist discourse is similarly illustrated in a historical study by Leila Ahmed (1992). She shows how Western feminist discourse during the British occupation of Egypt in the nineteenth century was employed in the service of colonialism (Ibid:151-155). According to Ahmed, feminist discourse in this era propagated the idea of an Islamic culture beyond the borders of a "civilised" West which oppressed women (Ibid). By using such ideologically 'functional feminist constructions, colonialist discourse proceeded to undermine and eradicate the culture of colonised people (Ibid). Ahmed (1992) argues that the adoption of the veil by many Muslim woman at the time was a symbol of their resistance to colonial definitions (Ibid:164). Thus Western feminist depictions of Muslim women as always oppressed by the phenomenon of veiling is both misrepresentative and reductionist. Western feminist critique of the "other" in this case implicitly asserts its own "positional superiority"<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup>. In his book "Orientalism" (1978) Edward Said describes the manner in which Western Orientalist scholars situate the Occident (the West) as "positionally superior" to the Orient (the East).



Moreover "authoritative" Western representations of Third World "other" women often deprive these women from articulating their own experiences. Desiree Lewis in her discussion of dominant feminist scholarship in South Africa makes the point that:

...patterns of racial domination have determined patterns of interpretive authority in South African scholarship and research. The trajectory of South African historiography reveals a fundamental unity regarding the mastery of those who represent and the silence of the represented. This relation is a racial one (1993:540).

The articulation of an inclusive feminist agenda by White women in South Africa is further complicated by the contradictory positions they occupy of being privileged by race and subordinated by gender.<sup>7</sup>

These examples collectively illustrate how the homogenisation of women forms part of a broader colonial discourse and knowledge project which attempts to suppress the experiences of the non-Western "other". This imbalanced power relationship is aptly reflected in the words of Third World feminist, Chandra Mohanty:

Power is exercised in any discourse when that discourse sets up it's own authorial subjects as the implicit referents, i.e. the yardstick by

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<sup>7</sup>. Jacklyn Cock's seminal work "Maids and Madams" (1980) points to the ways in which the availability of Black female domestic workers and babysitters in South Africa made it possible for many White women to reduce their domestic burdens and pursue "feminist" ideals in relation to their careers.

which to encode and represent cultural Others. It is in this move that power is exercised in discourse. (Mohanty 1991:55)

The appropriation of Third World women's lives and realities by Western feminist discourse is often embedded within exploitative power relations since as Mohanty points out,

colonialism almost always invariably implies a relation of structural domination and a suppression of the heterogeneity of the subjects in question. (Ibid 1991:52)

The fact that Third World women often form the "objects" of studies by Western feminists has resulted in the latter being selfishly invested in the silence of the former (Lewis, 1993:538). This contributes to inequitable power relations and further illustrates the point that there is no apolitical scholarship. Thus in the context of the global hegemony of Western scholarship, the representation of Third World women by Western women is rightly viewed as collusion with the project of cultural imperialism by the West.

## ii) Women as "Victim"

The homogenisation discourse and notions of women's shared oppression within Western feminism relates to the construction of women as *a priori* victims and as "powerless" (Mohanty et al. 1991:56). This approach does not examine particular material conditions and ideological frameworks which generate a certain context of disempowerment for a

specific group of women. Instead, various examples of disempowered women are used to corroborate the general thesis that women as a group are "powerless" (Ibid:57). Women become identified as an oppressed group prior to the process of analysis. The crucial fact that groups of women are constituted through the processes and structures of social relations is obscured.

A brief example of Western feminist scholarship which exemplifies such an approach to the study of Third World women is the work of Maria Cutrufelli, an Italian sociologist.<sup>8</sup> In her book "Women of Africa: Roots of Oppression" (1983) she makes a number of reductionist statements exemplified in the following examples: "my analysis will start by stating that all African women are politically and economically dependent" (Ibid:13) and "...nevertheless, either overtly or covertly, prostitution is still the main if not the only source of work for African women" (Ibid:33). These types of generalisations and objectification of Third World women results in the implicit perpetuation of dominant patriarchal and colonial discourses which freezes women and the colonised into particular analytical categories. Such an approach suppresses the ways

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<sup>8</sup>. For other examples of similar Western feminist approaches to the study of Third World women, see Fran Hosken's "Female genital mutilation and human rights" (1981) and Juliette Mince's "The house of obedience: Women in Arab society" (1980).

in which particular groups of women challenge, subvert and resist patriarchy at various points. Thus it undermines a politics of resistance and the construction of women as subjects capable of agency and transformation.

In proposing representative frames of reference for Third World feminism, the understanding and use of the term "Third World" is central. The term "Third World" refers to:

the colonised, neocolonised and decolonised countries (of Asia, Africa, and Latin America) whose economic and political structures have been deformed within the colonial process and to Black, Asian, Latino and indigenous peoples in North America, Europe and Australia. The term [...] intentionally foregrounds a history of colonisation and contemporary relationships of structural dominance between first and Third World peoples. (Mohanty 1991:ix-x)

The use of the term "Third World feminism" is qualified by the assertion that there are no monolithic Third World women or Third World situation for that matter. Mohanty (Ibid:4) explains that Third World feminists do not posit a generic "Third World woman" but rather utilise the term "Third World" as "an analytical and political category". Such a category, she explains, attempts to make connections in terms of the struggles of women in the Third World against racism, sexism, colonialism and neocolonialism in the context of particular balances of power in the world. Using such definitions, the idea of "Third World women" is not based on ethnic identity but rather refers to "a common

context of struggle" which facilitates the formation of politically oppositional alliances and coalitions in the face of specific exploitative structures (Ibid 1991:7).

A significant term related to these alliances between Third World women is "imagined communities" which relates to the exploration of

...the potential alliances and collaborations across divisive boundaries...and despite internal hierarchies within Third World contexts, the significant, deep commitment to "horizontal comradeship" (Mohanty 1991:4).

This notion of horizontal comradeship becomes especially salient when juxtaposed against the vertical, hierarchical power relations implicit in much of Western feminism.

The alternatives posed by many Third World feminists are premised on the understanding that "gender" and "women" are relative categories. Consequently they do not exist independently of other identities determined by race, class, national identity, religion, etc. (Johnson-Odim 1991). On the contrary, as Lewis (1993:538) argues, the gendered social subject, has a number of simultaneous social identities which overlap, interlink and position particular women at the nexus of different social hierarchies. The recognition and representation of such heterogeneity is an initial and fundamental premise from which any study of Third World women may proceed. I therefore agree with

Mohanty's proposal (1991:64-65) that feminists should move from grand theory to local studies, to carefully analyse the complex interaction between numerous identities within historically specific material realities which produce specific groups of "women".

In summation, as Mohanty argues (1991:51), the following are the two simultaneous projects of Third World feminism: "the internal critique of hegemonic "Western" feminisms and the formulation of autonomous, geographically historically and culturally grounded feminist concerns and strategies". The former she describes as "deconstructing and dismantling" and the latter is viewed as "building and constructing".

Finally I would like to end with a discussion on the apparent methodological paradox in my criticism of Western feminism. By having interrogated the approach of Western feminists as one which is guilty of homogenisation of Third World women, I have assumed a position which itself may be accused of homogenising Western feminism. In response to this, I would like to restate a point made earlier that it is not in fact all Western feminists that have ethnocentric approaches to the issue of heterogeneity amongst women. Examples of critical and vigilant work amongst Western feminists addressing issues of representation, difference and authority include the works of Meese (1986); Ramazanglu

(1989); Spelman (1990); Caraway (1991) and Russo (1991). However I maintain that such non-hierarchical scholarship has historically been limited and marginal in Western feminism. I maintain that the dominant and authoritative Western feminist discourses have in fact been both colonialist and ethnocentric. They have historically assumed defining positions on all women based solely on their limited White, middle-class female experience. It is this type of scholarship to which Third World feminists including myself direct their critique.

### 3. Muslim Women in parts of the Arab World

By locating groups of women at the nexus of different social relations, Third World feminism creates a space for analysing the impact of religion and culture from the standpoint of women within those particular traditions. A significant part of my thesis is aimed at recording the voices and experiences of Muslim women in South Africa. I have chosen to situate this discussion within the dialogue of other Muslim women in parts of the Arab world. My motivation for such a preliminary focus on the Arab world is the following: due to the historical association with the Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.), the religious discourse from the Arab world is seen as authoritative. Muslims from different parts of the world generally perform their daily

prayers in Arabic, many recite the Qur'ān in Arabic and large numbers of Muslim leaders and scholars study traditional Islamic texts which originated in the Arab world. The last-mentioned has significant socio-religious implications since these Arab-Islamic understandings of gender are often transmitted as religiously normative and definitive<sup>9</sup>. Hence the relationship between traditional Arab-Islamic discourse and women's rights often plays a significant role in shaping religious authority and women's lives in other parts of the Muslim world<sup>10</sup>. In terms of this hegemony of Arabo-Islamic discourse it becomes imperative to include the voices of different Arab women in this debate.

Muslim women in many different parts of the Arab world have constantly been engaging with the issue of gender inequality in their particular contexts (Hibri 1982; Mernissi 1991; Ahmed 1992). This is also evident from a study by Lebanese feminist, Bouthaina Shaaban (1991), where she presents numerous interviews with Arab Muslim Women in Syria, Palestine, Lebanon and Algeria<sup>11,12</sup> When asked about the

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<sup>9</sup>. This point is developed in a comprehensive manner in both chapters three and six.

<sup>10</sup>. The translation of such authoritative Arab-Islamic discourse in the lives of South African Muslim women is discussed extensively in chapter five.

<sup>11</sup>. While Algeria is an African country, the Arab-Islamic influence is dominant.



impact of Islam on their role as women, a few dominant themes emerged.

Firstly, most of the women identified Islam as an empowering and liberating phenomenon while juxtaposing this with the reality of male oppression in their socio-political contexts. According to many of these women it is the authoritative male chauvinist *interpretation* of the Islamic texts that is the locus of dissonance. In the words of a Syrian woman:

If the clergy (*al-shuyūkh*) would understand the Qur'ān properly and apply it correctly we would have no problem whatsoever....Arab countries are ostensibly governed by *Shari'ah* (Islamic law) but all laws relating to women are male chauvinist oriented versions of Islamic texts... (Shaaban 1991:54).

Another Syrian woman commented:

"Islamic law give women more rights than they actually have in most Muslim countries" (Ibid:68).

A Lebanese woman noted that:

Law is not an obstacle to our emancipation. The real obstacle is the attitude of the family and the society as a whole (Ibid:85).

Another Lebanese woman commented:

Islam originally took a revolutionary stand for women. The problem now is that Islamic countries

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<sup>12</sup>.. I have used Shaaban's book extensively because of its unique recording of the voices of many "ordinary" Arab women. The aim of recording "ordinary" "lay" women's experiences is underpinned by the principle of feminist research which prioritises the importance of relevant, non-hierarchical and representative research.

do not apply true Islamic laws but a biased male-dominated version of them (Ibid:127).

The manner in which Muslim religious leaders are perceived to be purveyors of sexism is a view echoed in the interviews that I conducted with Muslim South African women.<sup>13</sup>

A second major area which presented a problem for many Arab women interviewed concerned their entry into the public workplace and their resulting economic "independence".

Ironically this economic agency was practically translated into their greater exploitation. In effect, they were expected to work a double-day shift: their work outside of the house contributing to the family budget and at the same time they were expected to return to their homes and cook, clean, and see to the needs of their children and husband (Ibid:36-44).<sup>14</sup>

Thirdly, a significant area of resentment pertained to the way the women interviewed perceived that they were used for narrowly defined political objectives by males and then found their worth as gendered beings dismissed upon the attainment of these objectives. One of the most incisive

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<sup>13</sup>. This is explored extensively in chapter six.

<sup>14</sup>. These dynamics are paralleled in the South African context where economic necessity forces many Black women to work double shifts, and their entry into "male terrain" is more exploitative than liberating.

illustrations of the impact of numerous socio-political hierarchies on the formation of gender identity and constructs was evident from the experience of Algerian women who participated in the country's war of independence. These women were essential to the defeat of the French colonialists. When male guerilla fighters were unable to transfer weapons due to the repressive French occupying forces, women carried the revolution 'under their chadors'. Some contemporary Algerian women have remarked:

our only regret is the loss of our absolute equality achieved during the revolution. As far as that we seem to have moved backward instead of forward (Ibid:199)

The following is an even more skeptical view by an Algerian woman:

I feel that the Algerian men used the Algerian women during the revolution like weapons...during the revolution we were all freedom fighters, we forgot about domestic duties, after the revolution the men want to force us back into the home (Shaaban 1991:186).<sup>15</sup>

Fourthly, many of the women Shabaan interviewed had definite, often negative, views about Western feminism. The majority of these women pointed to the importance that they attached to the family. Western women, on the other hand, were perceived as preoccupied with personal and sexual

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<sup>15</sup>. The sense of betrayal and bitterness of Algerian women is also echoed in parallel situations of women freedom fighters in Southern African countries like Zimbabwe who received significantly less of the fruits of national liberation than did their male counterparts (Gittler 1995:9).

freedom, the latter being seen as a cover for more insidious forms of women's oppression and exploitation. A Lebanese woman echoed the view found amongst many other Arab women which strongly reiterated the importance of family in her priorities :

I feel that we are richer as women than they [Western women] are, richer inside...because I think that despite all the suppression, oppression and taboos, we have had more love in our families than they have had and I think that we have learnt more about giving...we are better givers...they are assertive of their personal needs, more selfish (Shaaban 1991:124).<sup>16</sup>

Nonetheless, three of the women interviewed held interesting alternative views. One woman suggested that Western feminism had been misrepresented by Arab men as primarily a movement for female sexual freedom and promiscuous mores in order to alienate Arab women from the movement (Ibid:128). Another drew attention to the incongruity between what is publicly permissible and what is privately done in Arab societies, describing it as:

schizophrenic,...not only about sexual matters but about social, moral, intellectual and religious issues...feminists are now leading the way to a more honest way of life (Shaaban 1991:177).

A third woman argued that the power relationships between spouses in the Arab world were hierarchical and did not

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<sup>16</sup>. This prioritisation of the family is a theme which also emerged within interviews with South African Muslim women conducted by the author among Muslim women from different ideological positions in different parts of South Africa in 1995.

allow for empathic sharing. The lack of mutuality in marital relationships combined with the fact of men occasionally having several spouses simultaneously and/or working abroad led to an increase in lesbian relationships. She suggested that there were more lesbians in the Arab world than there were in the Europe (Ibid:122).

The above discussion presents the diversity of voices among Muslim women in the Arab world. These women actively engage issues of gender in religio-political terms which belie dominant Western feminist depictions of Muslim women as "victims" of a patriarchal tradition.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, the interplay of many contexts in shaping the different realities of specific groups of women is evident. This complexity of women's context is further explored in relation to the South African Muslim community.

#### 4. The South African Muslim Debate

The gender debate within South Africa is intrinsically located within racial and class hierarchies. This reality has significantly impacted on the gender debate within the country's Muslim community, the majority of whom form part

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<sup>17</sup>. For an example of Western feminist writing which primarily depicts Arab women as passive victims see Juliette Minces The house of obedience: Women in Arab society (1980).

of the historically oppressed populace.<sup>18</sup> Equally valid is the fact that the struggle against apartheid has informed a significant part of the progressive, i.e., radical and egalitarian understandings of gender within the community.

The contemporary debate on gender in the South African Muslim communities is one that has aroused a great deal of controversy with the contesting voices emerging from very different gender ideologies. The focus of this section is on the manner in which the debate on women's rights has developed in the South African Muslim community. Due to the expansiveness of the topic, a selective historical

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<sup>18</sup>. The system of apartheid which existed formally in South Africa from 1948 to 1994 legally denied political expression to people of colour. These politically oppressed South Africans were, in apartheid terminology, divided into "African", "Indian" (South Africans whose ancestors came from India) and "Coloured" (South Africans of racially "mixed" heritage as well as people of Malaysian descent) racial groupings. The majority of South African Muslims were considered members of these sectors of society. Historically Muslims were concentrated in the so-called "Indian" and "Coloured" communities. It is important to note that with the growth of the Black Consciousness movement in the 1970's, these terms, viz. "Malay" and "Indian", were rejected by many people labelled as such. Many people coming from Malaysian or Indian descent embraced a "Black" identity. Small numbers of indigenous Africans converted to Islam since its introduction in South Africa in the 1600's. The last few decades has seen burgeoning numbers of Africans converting to Islam partly due to the political role that prominent groups of Muslims have played in the liberation struggle. However Muslims have not been politically homogenous and there have also been sectors of "Indian" and "Malay" Muslims who, having achieved middle and upper class economic status, have been politically complacent about apartheid. Some have been complicit in economic exploitation, racism and even collaboration within apartheid structures.

representation will be presented in this section in order to locate the current developments in the gender debate in this community.

#### 4.1. Islamic Resurgence and the Gender Debate

Two significant developments were crucial turning points in the development of Islamic thought and practice in South Africa. The first was the international resurgence of activist Islamic movements in the wake of the oil crisis in the 1970's and the revolution in Iran with their effects throughout the Muslim world, including the South African Muslim community (Esack 1992:170). Especially significant in the agenda of resurgent movements here was the importance placed on the education and empowerment of women (Ibid:179; Tayob 1995:126-7). The second development was the escalation of the national struggle against apartheid, particularly in the late 1980's, and the increased Muslim involvement in it (Tayob 1990). Due to this involvement in the human rights struggle, critical questions of justice, human rights and liberation were logically extended to issue of women's rights (Esack 1992:179). The development of the gender debate will be analysed here in terms of the above two developments, i.e., the transformation of Muslim politics in South Africa due to the impact of Islamic resurgence and the

Muslim involvement within the broader national struggle for liberation.

To analyse the impact of the Islamic resurgence movement, I will focus on the Muslim Youth Movement (MYM) as representative of a politico-ideological movement where the interplay between Islamic resurgence and the national struggle for liberation is reflected. Due to the paucity of research on Islamic Movements in South Africa this part of my analysis relies primarily on Tayob's (1995) records and perspectives of the MYM.

Tayob suggests that in the 1970's Islamic resurgence started to be visibly felt in South Africa and was exemplified in the establishment of the Muslim Youth Movement in 1970 (Ibid). This event occurred within the context of a global revival of an activist Islam with socio-political aspirations on the one hand and of a more traditional and conservative Islam which focussed on the ritual and communal dimensions of the faith on the other (Ibid:105). While the former attracted young middle class professionals, the latter was essentially the domain of the 'ulama class who had generally established themselves as the authoritative mediators of the Islamic worldview. The 'ulama's religious hegemony was challenged by Islamic resurgent movements who advocated the right and responsibility of every Muslim to



access the Qur'ān and other sources of religious knowledge (Ibid:107). This proposed shift in authority was epitomised in the formation of *halagat* (formation and study circles) and leadership and other educational training programmes embarked upon by the MYM (Ibid:127).

Islamic resurgence also had an impact on gender constructs and the understanding of the position of women. The issue of the emancipation of women was seen as central to the principles of the MYM. One of the five "guiding principles" appearing in the first handbook published by the MYM reads as follows: "to make women an integral part of the whole programme" since it believed that the unity of the *'Ummah* could not be achieved without the participation of women (cited in Tayob 1995:117). In the MYM programmes women participated in communal worship, albeit separately, educational groups and lectures (Ibid). This active involvement of women in MYM programmes was sharply contrasted against the restrained, domestic role afforded women in the orthodox *'ulama* ideology. The former's idea of active female Muslims undertaking their religious vicegerency on this earth sharply contrasted with a more orthodox perception of traditional female roles.

The *'ulama* argued against the MYM's position which actively supported the presence of women in the mosque (Esack

1992:179). In fact, Tayob (1995:127) points out, the presence of women in MYM activities became a crucial issue around which the 'ulama centered their denunciation of the MYM's new ideas. The active and visible participation of women in the MYM's programmes thus became an area of spirited contention between the 'ulama and the MYM (Ibid).

That the Islamic resurgence of the 1970's put the issue of gender on the South African Muslim map is evident. However there were still significant limitations in the gender ideology of the MYM. The ideas of this organisation often patronising, were usually articulated in fairly conservative terms by men. An example of the underlying sexist stereotyping and paternalism is found in a 1974 MYM Natal General Report which stated that the inaccessibility of mosques to women deprived them of the knowledge of Islam without which their lives "pivot around cinema, pop-music, fashion-shopping, cheap love story books, gossip - just to name a few" (Tayob 1995:124). Therefore I propose that the discourse on the liberation of women in the first decade within the MYM had an ambiguous tenor.

The gender ideology of the MYM was significantly radicalized by the end of the 1980's. This development was primarily due to the influence of the national political climate and the escalating Muslim involvement in the struggle against

apartheid (Esack 1992:175). This is not to suggest that there was no Muslim involvement in the national struggle against apartheid before the 80's. Prior to this individual Muslims were certainly very active in this struggle.<sup>19</sup> However such involvement was not primarily couched in religious terms, nor was there much sense of a community identifying with that struggle. Prominent Muslim women activists also featured in this earlier period of the struggle against apartheid, among them were Cissy Gool, Amina Cachalia and Fatima Meer.

The 1980's witnessed an upsurge in very strong anti-apartheid activity from within Muslim communities (Esack 1987). This activity, in tandem with that of non-Muslims, was nurtured by a new radical and contextual appreciation of Islam and Muslim identity. The struggle for justice was seen as an Islamic struggle or one necessitated by the demands of Islam. Some newly formed Islamic resurgent organisations like the Call of Islam (est. 1984) and Qiblah (est. 1981) aligned themselves with other national liberation movements such as the UDF and the Pan-African Congress respectively (Ibid). The MYM adopted a position which it called "positive neutrality", i.e., non-alignment toward any of the

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<sup>19</sup>. See Fatima Meer's biography of Nelson Mandela "Higher than Hope" (1990) as well as Nelson Mandela's autobiography "A Long walk to freedom" (1994) which refer to various Muslim political activists.

liberation movements but resistance to apartheid (Tayob 1995:169). They saw their involvement as a part of their Islamic identity and as a religious obligation upon all Muslims (Ibid:168-169).

This involvement in the struggle precipitated a number of theological debates within the Muslim community. An area of particular controversy which subsequently influenced the way the Qur'ānic text was re-interpreted with justice as a pivotal hermeneutical key was the Qur'ān's position on the issue of co-operation and political alliances with non-Muslims in the struggle against apartheid (Esack 1991).

The existence of seemingly contradictory positions in the text, some verses arguing for the co-operation while others prohibiting the believers from taking the Jews, Christians and *kuffar* (lit., 'ingrate', normally translated as 'unbelievers') as their friends and allies, opened up the hermeneutical debate of the Qur'ān (Ibid). The progressive Muslims responded to this by developing an understanding of the Qur'ān which distinguishes between the spirit of its legislation and its letter. Increasingly the Qur'ān was seen as the holistic embodiment of eternal principles while its specifics and detail were regarded as part of a functional socio-political text responding to a particular prophetic context or contexts. Interfaith solidarity against apartheid

was thus seen as congruent with the eternal Islamic principle of justice while the Qur'ānic prohibition of friendships with Jews and Christians were seen as context-bound, confined to the conditions of hostility under which the early Medinan community experienced their Islam in the Muhammedan era (Esack 1993).

Similarly, the consciousness of suffering and the authenticity of the other's experience and the concomitant determination to oppose all forms of injustice became a catalyst for the internal critique of these Muslim organisations on the issues of gender (Tayob 1995:173). Gender equality thus became an intrinsic part of the agenda for an Islamic struggle and earlier understandings of gender and women's rights were subjected to interrogation and critique. Farid Esack, then National Co-ordinator of the Call of Islam, succinctly articulated this internal critique when he denounced Muslims

who forever speak about the honour which Islam gave women as if it were some favour. Women, like all human beings are born with dignity and honour.... This dignity has accompanied the act of creation and thus becomes intrinsic to our humanness (Esack 1992:176).

Moreover, there was an attack on empty rhetoric about how Islam empowered women without acknowledging the real abuses that women experienced within Muslim communities (Ibid).

As indicated above, the opening up of the hermeneutical debate of the Qur'ān in relation to interfaith collaboration against apartheid had a ripple effect on the gender debate. A contextual understanding of the Qur'ānic verses on women and gender relations was initiated. Central in this initiative was Ebrahim Moosa, then National Co-ordinator of the MYM, who questioned the parameters of the Sharī'ah with regard to gender issues and pushed for their expansion (Esack 1993:180).<sup>20</sup>

The application of a gender-liberatory hermeneutic to the Qur'ān was evident in a presentation of then MYM regional executive member, Fatima Noordien. Her talk, titled "Women and Islam", was based on a contextual understanding of the Qur'ānic verse (60:12) which orders the Prophet (p.b.u.h) to accept the pledge of allegiance of women. Noordien interpreted this as a call for the full political participation of women. This was translated into practice by the subsequent assumption of leadership positions by women in the MYM. The election of a woman, Noordien, to the national executive in 1990 was in sharp contrast to the 1987 position when her election to the regional executive occurred "amidst considerable indecision regarding the

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<sup>20</sup>. Interviews with a number of activist women within the MYM conducted in 1995 revealed that the critical initiatives of Moosa were crucial in their own rethinking of the gender and hermeneutical debates.

participation of a female on the executive" (Tayob 1995:173).

A parallel development in the Call of Islam was manifest in the position taken by the organisation in relation to its first public leader, Imam Hassan Solomon. His traditional views on gender equality was a key factor in the organization's unwillingness to re-instate him in a leadership position upon his return from exile in Saudi Arabia (Esack, 1992:181). In response to questions on gender equality, he "affirmed the position of the *Ahl al-Sunnah* which sees no role for women in leadership" (Ibid). The fact that a number of leading Call of Islam figures were specifically mandated to examine Solomon's views on gender equality while he was in Saudi Arabia at a meeting in Harare, Zimbabwe, indicates the seriousness with which the issue came to be viewed in the organization in the late 1980's (Ibid).

#### **4.2. The Contemporary Scene**

The gender debate among South African Muslims has, with ever-increasing intensity, continued into the 1990's. It has in fact assumed a central place within contemporary South African Muslim politics. Two recent (1994-95) developments will be used to analyse the contemporary situation, namely,

the introduction of a Muslim Personal Law Board in South Africa and the delivery of the Friday sermon at a mosque by a woman theologian in August 1994.

#### **4.2.1. The Muslim Personal Law Board (MPLB)**

The period immediately following the adoption of South Africa's interim constitution and the country's first democratic elections in 1994 saw a sense of urgency in formulating a national position on Muslim Personal Law (al-Qalam 1994a; 1994b). This was related to the recognition of religious and traditional personal laws in the interim constitution (Ibid). Under apartheid and the Christian national ideology of the Nationalist Party, religious minorities were marginalised and their marriages only contracted according to religious rites which received no recognition in law (Moosa 1988). The children born from such unions were classified as illegitimate and the resulting bureaucratic difficulties for parents resulted in considerable inconvenience and suffering (Ibid). The recognition of Muslim Personal Law by the new government was therefore seen by Muslims as an opportunity to affirm their religious identity and to redress the injustices of the past.

The formation and deliberations of a Muslim Personal Law



Board became the new arena for the struggle between progressive and traditionalist Muslims (al-Qalam 1994f).<sup>21</sup> Prodded along by the African National Congress (ANC) who insisted that only a broadly representative body would get the ear of the new Government of National Unity (GNU), a large number of Muslim organizations assembled to form the MPLB (al-Qalam 1994d). Given the presence of all the traditionally-minded clerical associations and the MYM - Call of Islam progressives on the MPLB, it was inevitable that it would become the site of endless theological and jurisprudential battles.

The clerics called for the exemption of Muslim Personal Law (MPL) from the Equality Clause of the South African Bill of Rights and for the institution of Sharī'ah Courts to be staffed from among their ranks.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>. The incompatibility between traditional and progressive gender ideology was encapsulated in a pamphlet issued by the Mujlisul Ulama of South Africa called "MPLB Unacceptable" (undated) which stated that "since the new brand of 'Islam' which the modernist element propagates conforms to the un-Islamic ideas of "equality of the sexes", the modernist scheme is sure to find favour in government circles."

<sup>22</sup>. The Bill of Rights forms the second chapter of the South African Constitution. It entrenches the protection of human rights in the South African constitution. Particularly the Equality clause (clause 9) prohibits inter alia the unfair discrimination against anyone on the basis of gender. Thus, for example, traditional Muslim inheritance laws which allot smaller inheritance shares to women vis a vis men, could be challenged in a South African court of law on the basis of discrimination.

The Call of Islam and the Muslim Youth Movement on the other hand, argued that traditional interpretations of MPL prejudice women and distort the core foundational Islamic principles of equality and justice (al-Qalam 1994b; 1994d; 1995b). Such traditional interpretations would, among others, reinforce the male right to unilateral divorce, sanction polygamy in an unqualified manner and result in unequal inheritance rights for women (Ibid). They therefore argued for a reformist interpretation of Muslim Personal Law which would be subject to the constitution's equality clause (Ibid).

After less than a year of meetings and disputes about many issues including the presence and dress of women on the MPLB, in a procedural move of dubious legality, conservative elements unilaterally disbanded the MPLB and decided to proceed with the submission of draft bills to the GNU without being hamstrung by the progressive Muslims (al-Qalam 1995c; Mujlisul Ulama of South Africa n.d.).

#### **4.2.2. The Friday Sermon Controversy.**

The second major issue that has embroiled the South African Muslim community in a heated controversy is the delivery of a Friday sermon by a woman in a mosque in August 1994.

African-American Muslim theologian, Amina Wadud-Muhsin, visited South Africa as a guest of the University of South Africa. The Claremont Main Road Mosque in Cape Town, generally seen as the home of progressive Muslims, invited her to address the Friday congregation (al-Qalam 1994d).<sup>23</sup> The delivery of the sermon<sup>24</sup>, arguably one of the first by a woman in the contemporary world of Islam, was accompanied by the women congregants moving from the secluded first level to the ground level of the mosque, separated from the men but nevertheless alongside them in the main hall of the mosque (Ibid).

While the sermon was enthusiastically received and the event greeted with much joy and celebration by the congregants, it nevertheless sparked off bitter controversy in segments of the broader community (Ibid; al-Qalam 1994e) The delivery of the sermon by a Muslim woman was reported in national South African newspapers as a historical event and the response from the more conservative sectors of the community,

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<sup>23</sup>. The *imam* of the mosque, Abdul Rashid Omar, one-time national director of the MYM, is known for his commitment to the empowerment of Muslim women. This is reflected in the community counseling services and educational programmes which he initiated as well as in his sermons.

<sup>24</sup>. Officially her address, delivered from a rostrum, was considered to be a pre-sermon lecture because a formal and very brief sermon was still completed in Arabic from the pulpit. In the Claremont mosque though, the sermon is usually largely in English. On this occasion, the brevity of the formal Arabic sermon left no one in doubt that the address which really mattered was that of Wadud-Muhsin.

particularly the clerics, was swift and furious (Ibid). Along with a large number of women followers in *hijab*, they managed to prevent Wadud-Muhsin from delivering a lecture at another mosque the following evening (Ibid). Amid a rather tense atmosphere and the possibility of physical violence Wadud-Muhsin was whisked away to safety (Ibid).

The formation of a body called the Forum of Muslim Theologians was an immediate response by the traditional clergy to co-ordinate their resistance against the entry of women into public religious leadership (al-Qalam 1995a; 1995b). The formation of this body was solely motivated by the perceived threat of women's entry into the male religious domain. Moreover, in one of a number of subsequent demonstrations outside the Claremont Main Road mosque, violence erupted where female and male congregants were verbally and physically assaulted by a large crowd of conservatives (al-Qalam 1995a). This occurred during an unsuccessful attempt by the conservative clerics to oust the mosque's governing board and the *imām* of the mosque at its Annual General Meeting (Ibid). The general motivation for such demonstrations were related to the gender equality ethos encouraged within the Claremont mosque and was epitomised in the delivery of the sermon by Wadud-Muhsin.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup>. The continuing tension and controversy between progressive and conservative elements in the South African Muslim community has recently been termed by progressives, as

One of the related debates within the South African Muslim community is the manner in which Muslim women from different ideological positions articulate their understanding of the gender debate in Islam. The aforementioned controversies that have erupted within the community also illustrate that Muslim women in South Africa differ fundamentally among themselves on the question of women's rights in Islam. Similarly, in a number of interviews conducted by the author among Muslim women in Cape Town, it was found that Muslim women had varying attitudes towards Western feminism.<sup>26</sup>

Amongst more conservative women the issue of "sexual permissiveness" as part of a Western feminist agenda was found to be a major issue of contention. Some progressive women indicated that while there were problems which all women had in common, Western women had their own yardstick for measuring freedom which was not necessarily the same for Muslim women. As was the case with Arab Muslim women, a significant number of South African women also emphasised the importance of family. Despite the limited agreement in some areas, the dynamics of difference is vigorously at play

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"the gender jihad".

<sup>26</sup>. I conducted these informal unstructured interviews with Muslim women during 1994. The women's ideological positions ranged from those who called themselves religiously "conservative" to those that considered themselves "progressive and modernist" Muslims.

within the gender discourses of the South African Muslim community. It is also apparent that there is a multiplicity of context-bound power struggles in the definition of women's struggle within any specific community.

## 5. Feminism and Islam

From the previous discussion it is clear that the notion of a Muslim feminist movement is contentious and multi-faceted. While having provided the reader with an outline of the ideological complexities of the gender debates both internationally and locally, I now present my own position on the relevance of feminism to an Islamic discourse on gender.

Firstly, as articulated by Third World feminists, it is imperative to define feminism as separate from its imperialist and colonialist baggage. I reject colonial feminist representations of Muslim women as the "victimised" and voiceless "other". This represents an area of collision between particular expressions of feminism and the voice of many Muslim women.

However, as I have shown, there are alternative feminist discourses, such as Third World feminism, which are premised on the authentic self-representations of heterogenous groups

of women. This approach is one which embraces the particularity of context and the multiple identities of women. By definition it makes salient the question of religious identity in the experience of Muslim women. It allows for the collusion of feminist discourse with Muslim women's articulation of their engagement with gender issues. It also creates the space for meaningful dialogue and "horizontal comradeship" between groups of Muslim women and women from other religio-cultural contexts. The shared aspects of women's oppression and experiences may be engaged with a simultaneous recognition of the differences between various groups of women.

Such an approach is based on a vision of feminism free of hegemonic cultural impositions. The major commitments of such an approach were articulated by a group of international women in the following manner:

Our definition of feminism brought together the right of every woman to equity, dignity, and freedom of choice through the power to control her own life and the removal of all form of inequalities and oppression in society. We saw feminism as a worldview that has an impact on all aspects of life, and affirmed the broad context of the assertion that the "personal is political". This is to say that the individual aspects of oppression and change are not separate from the need for political and institutional change (Asian and Pacific center for women and development 1979:60).

Accordingly, regional problems are addressed by indigenous movements of women which have expanded the meaning of

feminism and the range of its tasks (Bunch 1995). When viewed in this broader political sense there is the feeling that feminism is emerging throughout the world among women of every culture, colour and class (Ibid). Women all over the world are demonstrating a growing determination to be active socio-political agents who participate in shaping society rather than remaining its victims.

While particular forms of women's oppression in different settings vary, there is the commonality in the dynamic of domination by which women are subordinated to the demands, definitions and desires of men (Lerner 1986). As will be discussed in this thesis Muslim communities are also affected by patriarchy and sexism. Simultaneously, groups of Muslim women like those from other religious communities, have raised dissident voices against such oppression (Mernissi 1991; Ahmed 1992; Wadud-Muhsin 1993). While no monolithic universal feminism exists, there is evidence of a shared feminist consciousness which is based on a commitment to justice for women.

The development of feminist epistemology and research, which has emerged significantly from Western feminism, is an important methodological tool which may be critically and meaningfully employed in other cultural contexts. In writing this thesis I thus critically engage the intersecting



discourses of feminism and Islam with an understanding of the related ambiguities.

## 6. Conclusion

This chapter provided a broad background and framework of gender debates in both feminist scholarship and in the Muslim world. The former foregrounds the problems of representation and women's voices due to the complex and interlinking identities of different groups of women based on, amongst other things, race, class, and religion. The latter focus on the Muslim world concentrates on parts of the Arab Muslim world as well as the South African context.

While the present chapter contextualises the debates and framework for the analysis of gender issues, the next chapter focusses on the particular issue of violence against women. This is analysed firstly, at the ideological level which includes a discussion of the role of culture and socialisation in the violence of patriarchal society. Secondly I examine the more specific case of wife battery in relation to psychological and sociological theory.

## CHAPTER TWO

### GENDER, GENDERING AND DISCOURSES OF VIOLENCE

*"One is not born but rather becomes a woman"*

Simone de Beauvoir

#### 1. Introduction.

In the previous chapter I situated this thesis within the broader debates of feminism. I also expounded some of the ambiguities of this discourse in relation to the Third World and the Muslim world(s). I then outlined the intersecting political, geographic, and religious dimensions of gender dynamics in the South African Muslim community. Chapter one therefore framed my approach within a broader body of feminist discourse and contextualised my examination of gender within an Islamic context in general and the Muslim South African community in particular.

In this chapter I explore the theoretical underpinnings of violence against women, particularly against wives. It comprises of a two-pronged analysis that examines violence against wives at a both a structural and a specific level. At the structural level I will examine the underlying gender and socio-cultural constructs which create and reinforce violence against women. This includes a discussion on the relationships between gender, socialisation, culture and

patriarchy. At the specific level I will provide a brief survey of the theoretical literature and research on wife battery. I conclude by indicating the complex web of ideological and power relations which inform the phenomenon of violence against wives.

## \* 2. Culture, Sex and Gender

People are born into societies which have established cultural norms (Richardson 1981:63). These norms consist of ideas and beliefs shared by a defined group of people and are symbolically expressed in their behaviour and artifacts (Ibid). Culture encompasses beliefs and ideas shared by a group of people concerning concepts of reality, notions of good and evil, parameters of appropriate behaviour and constructions of "femaleness" and "maleness" (Ibid).

It is generally accepted that cultural understandings of gender shift with the changes in historical moments and vary from one society to another (Daly 1978; Lerner 1986). For example, the Toda, a tribe from the Nilgiri hills in South India, see domestic work as a sacred task which is to be entrusted to men (Richardson 1981:63). The Tcambuli, a West African tribe, consider men to be emotionally dependent and irresponsible (Ibid). On the other hand, the Mundugomor and Arapesh, both tribes living in Papua, New Guinea, see males

and females as possessing essentially similar qualities  
(Ibid:3).<sup>1</sup>

Different understandings of what constitute "masculinity" and "femininity" show that cultures construct distinctive and self-fulfilling categories of gender for their members (Lowe 1983:39). These gender categories are then assumed to be factual, inalienable and axiomatic and consequently inform the myriad of beliefs and ideas shared by members of the specific cultural group. Gender constructs therefore form part of the shared cultural consciousness expressed in the dominant worldview of a given society (Richardson 1981:3-4).

In exploring the notion of gender as a culturally constructed category, one needs to differentiate between "sex" and "gender". "Sex" denotes a biological category, referring to the anatomical and physiological structure assigned to people at conception (Ruthven 1984:12) Gender, however, is a socio-culturally defined category encompassing psychological, social, cultural and political elements (Ibid). Unlike sex, gender is an attained status which is learned by people (Biehler & Hudson 1986:407). Children are

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<sup>1</sup>. According to Richardson, the Mundugomor see human beings as fundamentally violent, competitive and aggressive whereas the Arapesh view humanity as being gentle, kind and loving by nature (1981:63).

taught to behave and adopt attitudes congruent with their biological labels, i.e., male and female. Moreover, when men and women behave in culturally defined gender appropriate ways they are respectively perceived as "masculine" and "feminine" (Richardson 1981:5).

Gender refers to:

the cultural meaning attached to sexual identity...in other words, [while] sex is a neutral objective classification, gender, culturally imposed, reflects certain attitudes and assumptions (Maltz 1993:187).

Constructions of gender permeate all communities and these understandings are transmitted to successive generations through a process of transgenerational socialisation (de Beauvoir 1953:267). Religious constructions of gender, by implication, engage with, inform and are formulated by the broader cultural context.

### 3. Gender and Patriarchy

In patriarchal societies, the construction of gender is premised on inherent male superiority (De Beauvoir 1953: xvi). Patriarchy is a sophisticated and pervasive system which has manifested itself in many communities, in different historical periods and in various cultural expressions (Lerner 1986). In such communities power is significantly wielded by a male elite. The imbalance in

power relations between the sexes is a fundamental aspect of a patriarchal society. Moreover, socialisation into hierarchical gender roles and the notion of "natural difference" between the sexes is endemic to the maintenance of patriarchy (Ibid:207).

It is necessary to note that patriarchy is not a homogeneous, universal phenomenon. Rather it manifests itself in gendered power dynamics which are informed by, among others, race, class and religious power relations within a particular society. The manifestation of patriarchal power dynamics in one society is therefore often very different from that of another. Nonetheless, there are often parallel characteristics and ideological frameworks operating within such societies. The stereotyping of behaviour and characteristics into gender-specific categories is often presented as absolute and unchangeable. Moreover, stereotyped gender roles are hierarchically valued since males are considered as more valuable than females (Lowe 1983:39). Important and significant decision-making roles as defined by such a society are designated as part of the male realm while women are accorded secondary and subservient positions (Hirsch 1981).

In patriarchal societies, religious discourses are usually manipulated in order to construct and reinforce the unequal

status quo (Mernissi 1991:8-9). As will become apparent in the chapter on patriarchal interpretations of religious texts, the intellectual and spiritual realms are primarily constructed as the domain of men (Ruether 1983:93-95). Women are seen as essentially belonging to the bodily realms with a prioritisation of their roles of mother and wife (Ibid). This type of religious discourse dichotomises men and women into gender-specific characteristics and roles which are then sacralised. In this way religious discourse may culpably reinforce a sexist status quo.

It is clear therefore that social relationships and positioning are structured and informed by dominant patriarchal stereotypes. An important method for the transmission of stereotypes is the process of socialisation.

#### 4. Socialisation and the Patriarchal Family

A pervading element of the cultural legacy of the patriarchal family is that females are created to be wives (Dobash & Dobash 1979:76). The "true" and "real" criterion for womanhood requires becoming a wife and then a mother (Chodorow 1978:178). As Dobash and Dobash (1979:76) notes:

women are circumscribed by this [role of wife and mother], the only true legitimate status they are allowed, and all of their activities are in some ways restricted by it and defined in terms of it.

In most patriarchal communities marriage is viewed as normative for both men and women. However, the significance and importance attached to such a union is different for men as compared to women. For women, marriage is often viewed as the single most important aspect of their adult lives, whereas for men it regarded as of secondary importance (Schechter 1982:229-230). The hallmark of a successful women is achieving marital status, whereas success for a man relates to his acquisition of high career status (de Beauvoir 1953:426-427). These individual achievements in turn define the respective social status of each person (Dobash & Dobash 1979:76).

Socialisation into gendered roles begins in childhood (Biehler & Hudson 1986:407). Belotti (1975:76) illustrates how assertive, active, adventurous and independent behaviours are positively reinforced among male children which in turn facilitates the development of their individual potential and self-worth. The same author also demonstrates how parents, particularly mothers, are tolerant of and compliant with authoritative behaviour displayed by little boys, while the same behaviour is curtailed in little girls (Ibid:35). The latter are instead shaped and moulded into culturally approved images of docility, obedience and service. Females are valued for what they can supply and are taught to facilitate the needs of others even at the expense



of their own personal aspirations (Ibid:27; Chodorow 1978: 169).

Another important aspect of female socialisation relates to the priority placed on the presentation of their physical or bodily selves. Women are socialized into their own objectification by elaborate rituals which relate to making them physically enticing and sexually alluring. (Bartkey 1993:458; Zikalala 1994:19-23). In some cultures this "breaking in" and socialization of women into traditional norms of femininity may even include the mutilation of their bodies (Walker & Parmar 1993).<sup>2</sup> Women are socialised into dependence and into believing that their social acceptability and humanity are fundamentally embedded in their relationships with men.

Dobash and Dobash note

Boys and girls are socialised into the ideology and behaviours appropriate for female service and male authority, but the efforts to achieve this end must be directed most systematically at the girl for it is she who may come up against the harsh realities of what this process can lead to....To some extent, this training of girls is successful because it begins when the child is so young that there can be no conscious struggle against oppression (1981:80).

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<sup>2</sup>. Among the most destructive social norms of "feminising" the female body is the painful and injurious practices of female genital mutilation in certain cultures. See Walker and Parmar's (1993) extensive account.

It is evident that the socialisation of men and women into sexist gender roles position them within patriarchal power relations. These power relations are pivotal in examining an ideology which sanctions violence against women.

### 5. Role Gendering as Structural Violence

The following definitions provide the foundations for my understanding of structural violence. Oduyoye (1992:3) states:

The central meaning of violence...is the denial of the humanity of another. It is this which issues in acts of dehumanisation and the destruction of community. Violence happens between persons and communities. It is perpetrated by persons and by systems and structures created and operated by human beings (1992:3).

Bulhan (1985:135) asserts:

Violence is any relation, process or condition by which an individual or a group violates the physical, social and or psychological integrity of another person or group.

Smart (1980:175), drawing on the definition of Rene Girard, suggests:

Violence is...anything that destroys the ethical substance of a person.

Chidester (1991:xi) states:

Violence is the violation of humanity ...because it violates, denies or exploits human beings

Given the above definitions, sexist stereotyping limits and denies the humanity of women in several ways. I have

identified five ways in which sexist stereotyping may be considered. These are the "mother-wife syndrome", marginalisation, exclusion from knowledge, religious violations and violent protection.

### 5.1. The Wife-Mother Syndrome

The pervasive patriarchal construct of the ideal woman as a wife defines her in terms of the male. If humanity aspires towards the development of one's potential (Maslow:1971) then to mould women in terms of their primary roles as wives, mothers and sexual partners is to limit their humanity. Women's roles are therefore seen as primarily relational and sexual. Males, on the other hand, are encouraged in roles which facilitate their independence and self-actualisation. One may argue that cultural ideals of womanhood which only allow women to attain self-worth in terms of their relationships with men do violence to their humanity.

### 5.2. Marginalisation

Violence becomes manifest in the marginalisation of women or

in simply being rendered invisible...any culture that expects women to be silent, to accept subordinate roles and subordination is a violent culture (Oduyoye, 1993:5-6).

It is this devaluation which is the basis of all violence against women. Women are acculturated into accepting that men naturally assume the roles of leader, policy makers, directors of community development and that the role of women is to follow and be supportive (De Beauvoir 1953:426-428). Diverse obstacles, both physical and psychological, are created to prevent the involvement of women in the public sphere. The notion of joint decision-making between men and women (even on important issues within the home), is very rare in patriarchal cultures (Hirsch 1981:170). The trivialisation and devaluation of domestic labour consolidates the secondary status of women.

### 5.3. Exclusion from Knowledge

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The domestication of women is accompanied by their exclusion from avenues of knowledge production (Lerner 1986:223-225). The understanding of "knowledge as power" (Foucault 1980) underlies the historical absence of females from schools and universities. Female children were, and in some communities are still, not encouraged to attain the same level of education as male children (Ibid). For example, a generation ago in many "Indian-Muslim" South African families, female daughters were taken out of school at an early age since it was considered "unnecessary" to educate one's daughters. A small number of these women finished high school and very

few pursued tertiary education.<sup>3</sup>

This inaccessibility to education deprives many women of the opportunities to develop their full potential and career options. The lack of related skills and training also firmly entrenches them within the domestic sphere, which results in their economic dependence on their husbands. This in turn reinforces the imbalanced power differential in marriages. Thus, the exclusion of women from the production and generation of knowledge and hence from power maintains and perpetuates their subjugation. I therefore posit that this limitation of the intellectual potential of women does violence unto them.

#### 5.4. Religious Violations

Violence is also perpetrated against women by certain religious constructions within the Abrahamic traditions. The cosmogonies of the Judeo-Christian tradition in their portrayal of Eve as symbolising the prototypical woman, depict her as temptress and the morally weaker of the primal pair (Ess 1995:92-95). Many Islamic constructs are also premised on double-edged understandings of women as either the anarchic and sexual principle who distract men from

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<sup>3</sup>. Interviews conducted amongst women and men in the Muslim "Indian" communities of Durban in June 1995.

✱ spiritual devotions, or as a subservient and utilitarian domestic and sexual object for male convenience (Imran 1976:1-9; Malti-Douglas 1991:49-52, Sabbah 1984:34-43). Such androcentric perspectives emerge out of a male monopoly of religious knowledge and interpretations of religious texts. The philosophy of "anatomy is destiny" underlies patriarchal religious constructions of femininity (Stowasser 1987:265). I argue that such imaging does violence to the humanity of women. It is at this structural level that religious discourse plays a pivotal role in the construction of socio-cultural norms of gender and violence. This will be further explored in the next chapter.

### 5.5. Violent Protection.

Patriarchal gender constructions are also sometimes ambivalently presented. Notions of women's fragility and need to be "looked after" or "protected" by men may, on the surface, appear sympathetic to women. These notions, though, are invariably based on an understanding of women as social and moral minors (Lerner 1986:218). A patriarchal understanding of a "real man" is one who is strong, aggressive and whose duty it is to protect the honour of his woman. A "real woman", on the other hand, is regarded as soft, caring, fragile and comforting. A woman is often portrayed as beautiful and soft but essentially a

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\*"possession" of a man. One can ultimately do as one wishes with one's possessions: one can love, teach, protect, chastise,...one can batter and kill. When one extends this kind of mentality, then a very real possibility of "acceptable" physical violation of women arises. It is not the only logical conclusion that can be inferred, but it is a logical conclusion. The notion of man as protector is often premised on a paternalistic understanding of human nature and underpinned by patriarchal foundations of hierarchy (Ibid).

#### 5.6. Conclusion

Sexist stereotyping operates at two interrelated levels. It constitutes and constructs an ideological apparatus which generates structural violence against women. This creates the potential for physical violence and abuse against women. Collectively, sexist stereotyping contributes to the pervasive, systemic and structural violence endemic in patriarchy. Therefore violence against women is structurally axiomatic in a patriarchal ideology.

It is clear that the violation of women by men is far more insidious than the simple physical act of battery. However, it is in the act of the aggressive physical dehumanisation of women by men that violation is most brutal and overt.

✓ Physical violence is inextricably related to the violation of women's psyches and humanity.

## 6. Violence Against Wives

The intricate web of wife abuse encompasses emotional, psychological, and intellectual elements which takes its extreme form in physical violation. To view the overt physical and sexual abuse of women by their husbands as a single entity, or as isolated incidents or perverse behaviour is somewhat limited. Rather, as has been argued, it is crucial to see such abuses as manifestations of structural and normative practices which position men and women in hierarchical power relationships based on control, domination and subjugation.<sup>4</sup> Thus physical battery is the most extreme and visible expression of violence located on a continuum of a political, psychological and physical oppression of women. Moreover, female resistance to male violence is undermined by a patriarchal moral order which construes her struggle as "wrong, immoral and a violation of the respect and loyalty a wife is supposed to give her husband" (Dobash & Dobash 1979: ix).

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<sup>4</sup>. Domination is a term used to describe "social structure in which certain groups can determine and limit the spheres of activity of other groups" (Schechter 1982:216).



### 6.1. The Subjugation of Women in Personal-Political Spheres.

An important means of maintaining the abuse and violation of wives by their husbands is the privatisation of the family (Angless 1990:9). Given that the family is viewed as a personal sphere and often considered a "haven", it is also seen as the space where there is little or no interference from the outside world (Hirsch 1981:170). The family thus becomes an arena where the most violent abuse may be committed without exposure or external intervention.

It is this understanding of the family which underlies the police and neighbours' perception of wife battery as "domestic affairs" from which they should remain detached (Faragher 1985:118-122). A policeman who would as a matter of course physically prevent a person from assaulting someone else in public, would not do so in the case of a husband beating up his wife in their home because this is regarded as a "private affair" (Ibid). Battered women, on the other hand, often perceive their situation as unique. Hence they are ashamed, blame themselves and maintain the secrecy and privacy of their abuse (Hirsch 1981:179).

These responses are underpinned by particular perceptions of the "private" and the "public" spheres. The manner in which family life has been constructed as private and sanctified

helps to create the dichotomy of the personal and the political. This separation is particularly effective in concealing the reality of power imbalances in marital relationships (Schneider 1994:37-39).

The act of defining women's shared problems as "personal" and unsuitable for public discussion is an effective ideological tool. It conceals the reality that family life is as heavily permeated by power relations as public life. More importantly, as men dominate women in the "public" sphere, they dominate them in the "private" sphere (Tuttle, 1986:233). This dichotomy effectively maintains the status quo since "personal" issues of women do not enter the political agenda. In this manner any collective female conscientization, public mobilisation and resistance to gender oppression is suppressed. Without solidarity women's effectiveness as agents of transformation is limited .

One of the central assumptions of this thesis is that the personal *is* political. The dichotomy between the personal and the political is perpetuated by the stereotyping of women as primarily wife and mother and as the maintainer of the "private", domestic domain. It is precisely

through the personal institutions of marriage, childrearing, love and sexual relationships that male power is reinforced and only when the personal is treated as seriously and as critically as the public, can the roots of sexism be found. (Tuttle 1986:296).

Thus to know the politics of women's situation is to know that which has been constructed as the intimate, private and personal spheres of their lives (Humm 1989:106).

The argument that the "personal is political" also relates to the issue of terminology. As indicated in the title, the subject being examined is the "violation of wives by their husbands". I refrain from using the term "domestic violence" because this type of terminology often depoliticises the violence which takes place. It is an ideologically loaded description which may obscure and privatise the violence. It does not name the perpetrator nor the victim and hence lapses into an apolitical neutrality. It is important not only to name the crimes against women but to name the criminals. Furthermore, the term "domestic violence" helps to perpetuate the myth of the separation between the personal and the political (Dobash and Dobash 1979:11; Pharr 1993:62).

## 6.2 The Prevalence of Wife Battery

The ideology of separating the political and the private is thus integral to the maintenance of undetected male violence against women in their homes. Despite the silence surrounding this phenomenon, it pervades societies throughout the world (Levinson 1989). Levinson (1989:33)

✓ found that wife-battery was the most prevalent type of "family violence" in societies around the world.

In South Africa the paucity of empirical research is partly due to the fact that police records do not differentiate wife-battery from any other type of assault. Nonetheless non-governmental organisations in South Africa have provided estimates of wife-battery based on their experience of caseloads and surveys.<sup>5</sup> The National Institute for Crime Prevention and Rehabilitation of Offenders (NICRO), Cape Town, a non-governmental organisation, reported that since the passing of "The Prevention of Family Violence Act" in December 1993, over 5000 interdicts were granted to women against violent husbands within the first year. All of these were granted in only seven magisterial districts in the Cape. It should be noted that these numbers only represent the number of women who reported abuse and were prepared to seek legal recourse.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>. These non-governmental organisations include among others, the Advice Desk for Abused Women, Agisanang Domestic Abuse Prevention and Training (ADAPT), Bait-ul-nur, Black Sash, Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, Crisis Line, End Racism and Sexism Through Education (ERASE), 702 Helpline, Ilitha Albantu, Ikinross Women's League, Lawyers for Human Rights, Lifeline, National Institute for Crime Prevention and Rehabilitation of Offenders (NICRO), NISAA Institute for Women's Development, People Opposing Women Abuse (POWA) Rape Crisis, Salvation Army, Women Against Women Abuse, Women and Child Project, Women's Health Project and Yohuselo Haven for Battered Women.

<sup>6</sup>. Nicro provides a regular counselling service and facilitates support groups for battered women. I conducted an interview with Jane Keene, director of NICRO Women's Support

In 1992, Rape Crisis in South Africa estimated that one in every three women was assaulted by her male partner (Hansson and Hofmeyer: n.d.). Organisations such as People Opposing Women Abuse (POWA) and Coordinated Action for Battered Women both estimate that one in six women is abused by her partner (Human Rights Watch 1995:45). In a 1995 survey, the Human Science Research Council found that 43 percent of 159 married women surveyed in the Cape Town Metropolitan area had been subjected to marital rape or assault (Ibid). A survey conducted at the Groote Schuur Hospital in Cape Town showed that four times as many women as men treated for assault-related injuries in the home had been abused by a partner (Ibid:46). Research done in Mitchell's Plain, a suburb of Cape Town, by Lawrence (1984) found that wife-battery was the second highest reported crime. The above data, albeit limited, provides some basis for estimating the prevalence of wife abuse in South Africa. This fairly widespread phenomenon has been understood in various ways, some of which I now proceed to outline.

### 6.3. Theories of Battery

Several explanatory theories, particularly in the disciplines of psychology and sociology, have been advanced to explain wife battering. I have chosen three of the dominant theoretical orientations identified by Angless (1990:10-25).

#### 6.3.1. Psycho-Pathological Models

Emerging from the psychiatric paradigm in the 1960's and 1970's, this model is premised on the notion of individual normality/health *vis a vis* abnormality/illness. This implied that the problem lay primarily within the individuals who exhibited abnormal psychological traits in a battered relationship (Hansen and Harway 1993; Pence 1984). Some proponents of this approach believed that battered women were inherently and pathologically masochistic and that they provoked such responses from their husbands (Snell, Rosenwald & Robey 1964). Pathological intrapsychic [individual psychological] characteristics are seen as motivating certain women to seek abusive relationships.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>. These "blaming the victim" approaches have been challenged by a number of subsequent studies. Research conducted by Symonds (1979) and Walker (1984) shows that a significant majority of battered women are in marital relationships where the husband has a pre-existing history of violence. Moreover most of the women are not aware of the violent tendencies of their husbands before marriage and thus

An alternative view of the psycho-pathological model proposes that the batterer suffers from an individual pathology of dysfunctional personality characteristics which causes his violent behaviour. As Angless (1990:14) has argued, this approach is narrowly individualistic and shifts responsibility from the batterer to either victim or to some traits within his own personality. It also dichotomises the personal (psychic) from the public (social) realm and obfuscates the interdependence between the two. Such an analysis of battery is decontextualised and does not recognise the impact of broader social relations and power configurations on the phenomenon of wife abuse (Ibid).

#### **6.3.2. Social-Psychological Models**

The socio-psychological model which focussed on the relationship between individuals and their social environment addresses some of the inadequacies in the psycho-pathological model. One of the earlier approaches within this school was Goode's exchange theory (1971) which saw force or potential force as an essential component for the maintenance of all institutions including the family unit. However, this approach ignores the fact that within battering relationships violence is not exchanged equally

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could not have consciously sought out such a relationship (Angless 1990:11-12).

between different family members but rather is generally perpetrated against women by men (Angless 1990:15-16).

Later approaches (Gelles 1979; Straus 1978) saw violence as emerging out of a complex interaction of factors. Causality was not viewed as singular but was seen as resulting from social stress as well as a culture of violence. Social stress factors include poverty, unemployment and the social isolation of the nuclear family, all of which are seen to exacerbate the possibility of violence within the family.<sup>8</sup> The "cycle of violence" theorists hold that children who experienced violence become abusive adults because violence was normalised as an effective means of conflict resolution. The behaviour of norm-giving role models within their family and/or society played a role in this normalisation.<sup>9</sup>

Dobash and Dobash (1979) examined the "cycle of violence" thesis and found that 40% of men from violent families did not perpetuate such behaviour. Thus it could be argued that experiencing and observing parental violence could also

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<sup>8</sup>. Due to apartheid, issues of poverty, political and socio-economic stress for Black people in South Africa are particularly salient.

<sup>9</sup>. This theory would have applicability in a South African context where the apartheid legacy has contributed to the creation of an excessively violent society. A World Health Organisation report in 1995 states that South Africa has the highest per capita figures for violent deaths recorded in any country not at war and that rape figures in South Africa are similarly high (cited in Human Rights Watch 1995).



serve as a deterrent to repeating such behaviour. An important question remains unanswered in this theory: if a violent culture was seen as norm-giving, why is it largely males who emulate such violent behaviour?<sup>10</sup> This question is addressed by the radical feminist approach.

All of the above theories view violence as inherent in society and as a reaction to a particular situation of stress and socialisation. These theories therefore partially afford violence some legitimacy.

#### 6.3.3. Radical Feminist Models

The radical feminist approach to wife battering emerges from a broader body of feminist theory. Feminist perspectives situate the phenomenon of wife battering on a social continuum of pervasive violence against women in society ranging from rape, pornography and genital mutilation to sexual harassment and discrimination (Hansen & Harway 1993: vii-ix; Bograd 1988:14). One of the central questions addressed by the radical feminist approach poses the fundamental question of why "violence is most frequently

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<sup>10</sup>. Dobash and Dobash (1979:16) makes an important observation regarding the "impact of role-modeling within society: "Violence as learned behaviour reflects societal attitudes regarding women and wives as "appropriate" victims, that men believe that their wives should be controlled by them, and that violence is one way of maintaining this.

directed at women rather than why individual men or relationships are violent" (Angless 1990:22).

Radical feminists regard the power-location of men and women in patriarchal societies as the central reason for the oppression of women (Hansen & Harway 1993). Violence is viewed as a logical extension of power relations which position women as a powerless subordinate class and men as a powerful superordinate class. A dominant sexist status quo is thus seen as a generic part of the manifestation of violence against women. Particularly, the gendered organisation of the patriarchal family and womens' powerlessness within this social unit is seen as a major contributory factor to the phenomenon of wife battering (Bograd 1988:14-15). Wife battering is seen as the logical extension of a social order which positions men as authoritative and powerful and women as submissive and powerless (Ibid; Angless 1990:23).

The insights of radical feminism regarding power relations between men and women is used in this thesis as a crucial entry point into the exploration of wife battery. This is paralleled with the Third World feminist understanding that power relations within different contexts are constituted by the peculiarities of that context and must be examined within local socio-historical formations. The manner in

which religious discourse create, reinforce and also subvert such power relations is the focus of the rest of this thesis.

## 7. Conclusion

In this chapter I examined some of the theoretical debates underpinning the phenomenon of violence against wives. I began with a discussion on the relationship between culture and gender, and their application to patriarchal societies. This was followed by an analysis of socialisation in the patriarchal family. Next, the functioning of gender role stereotypes as structural violence was discussed. Finally, the physical violation of wives by their husbands was examined in relation to firstly, the personal-political spheres, secondly, to socio-psychological theories of wife battery and thirdly, to the radical feminist approach.

In this chapter I illustrated how patriarchal social structures and processes of socialisation inherently create misogynist constructs of gender and gender relations. These generate the systemic and ideological foundations for violence against women. I described certain theories of violence against wives which have been advanced in various academic disciplines including sociology and psychology. I argued that the psycho-pathological and social-psychological

explanatory frameworks were reductionist and did not address the crucial component of gendered power-differentials in the phenomenon of wife battering. This issue was addressed by radical feminist approaches to wife battering.

In the next chapter I will examine the role of religious text, as mediated by religious scholars, in the creation of gender-power constructs and its implications for violence against wives.

### CHAPTER 3

#### MEDIEVAL GENDER IDEOLOGY, MISOGYNY AND THE QURAN

*"As God's own words Qur'anic statements are normative for the thought and behaviour of Muslims"*

Jane McAuliffe.

*"The manipulation of sacred text has always been a structural characteristic of the practice of power in Muslim societies"*

Fatima Mernissi.

#### 1. Introduction

The previous chapter analysed the complex interaction between gender ideology, systemic violence against women and the explicit physical violation of wives by their husbands. I have suggested that religion plays an important role at the level of gender ideology. The focus of the next two chapters is the analysis of Islamic gender ideology and its implications for violence against women. The next two chapters form a conceptual unit in that both chapters address Qur'ānic constructions of gender. While this chapter focuses on a selection of authoritative medieval Qur'ānic exegesis, the next chapter examines contemporary interpretations of gender ideology in the Qur'ān.

The present discussion on the gender ideology of medieval exegetical studies begins with a preliminary outline of the significance of the Qur'ān in Muslim societies and the related centrality of exegesis. Here I provide a rationale for my focus on the interpretations of particular exegetes. Secondly, I describe my methodology which is the application of a feminist hermeneutic to the exegetical studies. Thirdly, I proceed with my own analysis of the exegesis. Here I focus on the interpretations of the verse Q.4:34 as the index of socio-religious gender constructions.

## **2. The Qur'an and its Interpretation**

The centrality of the Qur'ān in a Muslim worldview has been well recorded (Izutsu 1966; Murata & Chittick 1994; Rahman 1980; Tabataba'i 1987). It is generally perceived by Muslims as the ultimate reference point, the distinguishing criterion (al-Furqan) for good and evil and as the transcendent authority which sets parameters and standards for human existence (McAuliffe 1991). Consequently it occupies centre-stage in the Muslim religious *imaginaire*. It thus influences social structure, ideas of normative human relations and boundaries for appropriate behaviour (Tabataba'i 1987). Hence the Qur'ān is not only a religious text but also a profoundly political text which shapes the understandings of Muslim societies. Due to this powerful

position of the Qur'ān in Muslim consciousness it is appropriate to examine its implications for gender relations.

The Qur'ān mediates itself into social and collective consciousness through human understanding (Esack 1991:216-218). Therefore in analysing the application of the Qur'ān to society and gender relations it is necessary to examine the authoritative mediations of the Qur'ān. Qur'ānic understandings do not enter socio-cultural vacuums but are presented into already symbolically and culturally meaningful contexts (Martin 1982:367). Hence Qur'ānic readers and interpreters bring to the texts their own "prior-texts", their own worldviews and their own traditions of meaning informed by particular socio-historical positioning (Wadud-Muhsin 1992:1-7). Thus the creation of meaning of and from the Qur'ān fundamentally involves the human interpretive attribution. In this regard, I agree with the view of Qur'ānic scholar Richard Martin that:

getting at the meanings must focus on the interpretations of meaning, which means the interpreter and his\her historical\cultural horizon of understanding (1982:363).

Historically the most powerful and authoritative interpretive body of Qur'ānic scholarship is known as *tafsir* (exegesis). Adams asserts that *tafsir* is a critical index of Muslim self-understanding. According to Adams:

there is probably no richer or more important key to the basic always evolving significance of the Qur'ān in the Muslim religious consciousness than the tradition of Tafsir writing (1976:65).

Given the above, it may be inferred that the exegetical texts reflect the dynamic interaction between sacred text, consciousness and social reality. I believe that it is at the nexus of these three critical junctures that the religious constructions of gender are most powerful and influential. I have chosen to focus on the exegetical writings of selected medieval Islamic scholars to analyse the historical scriptural world of gender within Islamic discourse. My aim is to elicit how gender is conceived, imagined, and created by these interpreters of the Qur'ān.

I will analyse the interpretations of three classical exegetes, namely, Abū Ja'far Muhammad Jarīr al-Tabarī (839-922) and Abū al-Qāsim Maḥmūd b. 'Umar al-Zamaksharī (1075-1144) Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (1149-1210). Spanning the period from the ninth century to the thirteenth century, they represent classical medieval scholarship. Al-Tabarī was a traditionist, al-Zamaksharī a Mu'tazilite and al-Rāzī an Ash'arite.

My rationale for selecting these scholars is based on the fact that they are viewed as leading exegetical authorities among Islamic orthodoxy. Their work represents the dominant



evolving historical legacy of traditional Islamic interpretation. It also provides a window into the socio-cultural gender norms which informed their interpretations of the Qur'an. They represent historically significant schools of traditional Islamic thought spanning three centuries and their interpretations are taught and transmitted as authoritative understandings of the Qur'an in most traditional Islamic institutions.<sup>11</sup>

In South Africa, as elsewhere, most of the traditionally trained Muslim leaders are schooled in these classical texts which then inform their own perspectives (Esack 1991:207). These perspectives are transmitted into society by virtue of their roles as religious leaders, marriage counsellors and Islamic legal advisors<sup>12</sup>. Hence their understandings impact upon notions of normative gender relations and consequently on the way in which religious discourses of violence against wives are conceptualised.

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<sup>11</sup>. These include traditional Islamic institutions in the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent, the Middle East as well as many of the local "Dar-ul-'ulums" in South Africa.

<sup>12</sup>. I will illustrate and discuss the central role that traditionally trained Islamic leaders ('ulama) play as mediators in marital conflict and in cases of abusive relationships in chapter five.

### 3. Methodology

Historically m (geses) were written almost exclusively by (2:2). In examining a historical narrative of ge. tafsīr (exegeses) of these scholars, I will ticular mode of analysis, namely, feminist . Feminist hermeneutics is a "theory, method o for understanding and interpretation" (F 5:X) which is sensitive to and critical of sexism. I approach the *tafsīr* texts with a "hermeneutic of suspicion" which is alert to both explicit and implicit patriarchal bias (West 1991:76-77). A hermeneutic of suspicion does "not trust or accept interpretive traditions as 'truth'" (Fiorenza 1995:X) but rather adopts a stance of suspicion. The aim is to critically evaluate and expose patriarchal structures, values and male-centred concerns. This approach focuses on the text as an ideological androcentric product (Sakenfield 1985:55-56). Thus I approach the selected exegetical works as representative of a patriarchal historical cultural milieu.

I will also use a particular mode of feminist hermeneutics derived from a model presented by biblical scholar Gerald West which involves "reading behind the text" (West 1991:77). This mode focuses on sociological and historical

reconstructions of the society behind the text. Accordingly, I will excavate from *tafsīr* texts, which are predominantly male records and understandings of reality, underlying images of the ordinary women. The aim is to redress the silences on women's lives, to lift out the marginalised voices, to reconstruct the absent female and to be vigilant of the patriarchal assumptions. According to Sakenfield (1989:166):

Our contemporary responsibility is to listen to past and present voices who have been heard least, including women, because hearing voices that have been ignored or silenced enables the community to question its own assumptions and thus to have a greater likelihood of encountering the God who seeks to encounter us.

This chapter then examines the evolving, gendered worldviews of the authoritative Islamic legacy through an analysis of the historical interpretations of the Qur'ān. More specifically the aim is to apply a critical feminist hermeneutic to the *tafsīr* texts. In so doing I will subject some of the formative gender discourses in traditional Islamic exegesis to ideological examination and critique. The particular issue which constitutes the focal point of such an analysis is the relationship between gendered Islamic consciousness and discourses of violence against women by their husbands.

#### 4. Qur'anic Exegesis, Gender Ideology and Violence

In my analysis of the exegetical literature, Sūrah Nisā<sup>3</sup> verse 34 (Q.4:34 - from now on also referred to as the *nushūz* verse) is used as a central hermeneutical key around which the debate on gender constructions and violence against women will unfold. The translation of this verse reads as follows:<sup>13</sup>

*Men are (qawwāmūn) the Protectors and maintainers  
of women,  
Because God has given the one more strength than  
the other,  
and because they support them from their means.  
Therefore the righteous (ṣālihāt) women are  
devoutly obedient (qāniṭāt),  
and guard in their husbands absence  
what God would have them guard.*

*As to those women on whose part you fear  
(nushuz) disloyalty and ill conduct.  
Admonish them (first), refuse to share their beds  
(next)  
and (last) beat them  
But if they return again to obedience  
seek not means against them  
for God is the most high, Great above you*

The rationale for focussing on this verse is due to the fact that it has been understood to condone violence against wives. Interpreted to be espousing hierarchical gender

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<sup>13</sup>. Certain crucial Arabic terms are contested and open to different translations and interpretations. In these cases I will provide a preliminary translation but will primarily use the Arabic terms in the rest of the text.

relations, these verses are seen to create the space for the "legitimate" physical punishment of women by their husbands.

#### 4.1. The Occasion of Revelation

The occasion of revelation (asbāb ul-nuzūl) of this verse is presented by the exegetes as follows. A woman whose husband had slapped her left the marital home and complained to the Prophet. He condoned her departure from the home of her husband, advising her to maintain the separation until revelation provided guidance. It was at this point that the revelation of the Q.4:34 was reported to have occurred (al-Rāzī, n.d.:90-1; al-Zamaksharī n.d.:506; al-Ṭabarī 1948:58-9).

Zamaksharī adds that the Prophet, prior to revelation, permitted the wife and her father to demand compensation (*qiṣās*) from the husband. Thus revelation of these verses abrogated the Prophet's recommendation and he is reported to have responded by saying "we (meaning himself) wanted something and God wanted something else and what God wants is best" (al-Zamaksharī n.d.:506).

This context of revelation of the verse sets the scenario for the rest of its interpretation by these scholars. I have divided my analysis of their exegesis into four parts.

Firstly, I present reflections on interpretations of *qiwāma*, which provides the framework for the definition of gender. Secondly, I analyse the definitions of the *qāniṭāṭ* which is the term used to describe righteous women. Thirdly, I examine constructions of the *nāshiza*, the "disobedient" woman. Finally, I assess their notions of female repentance. This analysis follows the chronological arrangement of the verse in the exegetical style of the classical scholars. Simultaneously it makes holistic thematic connections between the interrelated exegetical narratives of gender.

#### 4.2. Qiwama: The Framework of Gender Relations

*Men are the Protectors and maintainers (qawwamun)  
of women,  
Because God has given the one more strength than  
the other...*

In defining the relationship of *qiwama* the medieval commentators presented their framework for understanding gender relations. Al-Ṭabarī stated that the relationship of *qiwāma* is premised on the material preference that men had been granted (1948:57-59). He suggested that this preference implied the financial responsibility of men to provide their wives with marriage dowers (*mahr*), and with financial maintenance (*nafaqa*) (Ibid:57). Thus al-Ṭabarī conceptualised the relationship of *qiwāma* as contingent on a socio-economic phenomenon rather than some inherent quality of man or woman per se.

Two centuries later also during Abbassid rule, al-Zamaksharī (n.d.:505) interprets *qiwama* as the unambiguous and categorical rulership (*musaytirūn*) of men over women. He suggests that the male-female relationship parallels the relationship between sovereign political leader and a male citizen (Ibid). In the same way that a political leader instructs his subjects to perform or abstain from particular acts, so do also men command and forbid their women (Ibid). This comparison reflects prevalent socio-political images of autocratic political authorities over ordinary, male citizens. In this way state political power relations have a mimetic effect on domestic politics and this illustrates the fluidity between "private" and "public" discourses.

Al-Zamaksharī asserts that the relationship of *qiwama* is based on natural preferences which God has granted to men over women (al-Zamaksharī n.d.:505). Writing a generation after him, al-Rāzī, the Asharite, concurs with this view (al-Rāzī n.d.:90). These exegetes' understandings of humanity is based on the premise of intrinsic natural differences between men and women. Both these exegetes, al-Zamaksharī and al-Rāzī, regard men as naturally gifted with a number of superior attributes which range from intellect and determination to literacy and the ability to ride (al-Zamaksharī n.d.:505; al-Rāzī n.d.:91). Due to this notion of a qualitatively superior male constitution, they argue that

men are natural leaders in the spheres of religion, politics, the judiciary and marriage (Ibid). Thus in presenting a set of criteria for difference between men and women, al-Zamaksharī and al-Rāzī conflate "biological" and socially constructed potentials. This religious discourse of intrinsic gender difference pervades the rest of their interpretations and points to underlying anthropological assumptions. These religious or theological anthropologies underpinning the exegesis will now be excavated, examined and interrogated.

#### **4.2.1. Qiwāma: Theological Anthropology and Difference**

The notion of a theological anthropology raises the question of what it means to be human within a religious framework (Carr 1988:117). This involves an analysis of how religious discourses of values, beliefs and practices define human beings. It is therefore an implicit component of any religious discourse. The questions that arise from an inquiry into theological anthropology are as follows: What does it mean to be human? What is the vision of humanity? What goal for human life is proposed in religious scripture? These questions are integrally related to religious understandings of gender and gender relations.



Al-Zamaksharī and al-Rāzī's definition of male *qiwāma* (rulership; *musaytirun*) as pointed out earlier, is premised on hierarchical and dualistic anthropological categories. Their framework positions men and women as polar opposites whose interactions reflect power relations of dominance and subjugation (Carr 1988:121-123; Ruether 1983:93-95). Men and notions of masculinity are associated with rationality, intellect, and spirituality. In contrast, women and "femininity" are constructed as emotional, irrational, carnal and sexual (Ruether Ibid). Thus patriarchal anthropologies posit a transcendence/immanence polarity, a body/mind dualism where the male pole is considered more powerful and more valuable than the female (Carr 1988:121-122). This dichotomy translates into a hierarchical understanding of humanity which prioritises mind over body, reason over passion, spirituality over carnality and male over female (Ackermann 1992:19-20).

Patriarchal anthropology is apparent in the interpretations of those exegetes who interpret *qiwāma* as the God-given relationship of power and authority that men are granted over women. They consider male *qiwāma* to be based on an inherent intellectual and spiritual superiority (al-Zamakshari n.d.: 505; al-Razi n.d.:91). Accordingly, they argue that all social roles that require intellectual or spiritual strength, such as political and religious

leadership, be viewed as exclusively male (Ibid). al-Zamaksharī and al-Rāzī's interpretation of *qiwāma* as the "natural" preference that men are granted may be seen to reflect the normative gender ideology and gender roles prevalent in these exegetes' socio-political and cultural realities.

As discussed earlier a hermeneutic of suspicion involves reading behind the text since silences and omissions betray an ideological bias. These silences and omissions together with the statements of the exegetical text may be interpreted to reflect the socio-cultural realities behind the text. In terms of the exegetes' understandings of natural male intellectual superiority, I infer that the development and manifestation of women's intelligence (as defined by male discourses of knowledge) were absent or marginalised. Their exegeses therefore imply that the most visible arenas of knowledge discourse were unavailable and inaccessible to women. This also becomes apparent in the language of the exegetes who regularly address the male reader as "you" while women are referred to as "they", the third party or the 'other'. An example of this in al-Razi's writing: "If YOU [emphasis mine] fear something in your heart from your women...if there is something in THEIR [emphasis mine] behaviour..." (al-Razi n.d.:92). This

language also implies that the prevailing readership and scholarship was primarily male.

What is evident from the exegesis is that the multi-dimensional differences between men and women in a specific historical context are indiscriminately clustered together as natural and eternal givens. Acquired skills or culturally determined roles are constructed as "facts", "truth" and inherent properties of maleness and femaleness.

The anthropological paradigm of difference and dualism used by the exegetes in their interpretation of *qiwāma* frames their understanding of women. This is explored further in their interpretation of the rest of the verse which discusses the *qāniṭāt*, referring to the righteous or normative woman and then the *nāshiza*, the "disobedient" or non-conforming woman.

#### 4.3. The Normative Woman

Q.4:34 describes the "righteous" women as:

*Therefore the righteous (ṣāliḥāt) women are  
devoutly obedient (qāniṭāt),  
and guard in their husbands absence  
what God would have them guard.*

The verse links *ṣāliḥāt*, (meaning those women who do "good", are "pious" and "righteous") to *qāniṭāt*. The word *qāniṭāt*,

meaning "devout" or "obedient" women, has provoked considerable controversy amongst the exegetes (al-Ṭabarī 1948:59-60; al-Rāzī n.d.:91-92). Among the classical exegetes the disputed point related to whom the "object" or recipient of this female obedience was. Was it God?, her husband, or both?

Al-Ṭabarī's tafsir presents *qanitat* as a contested definition without committing himself to identifying the object of obedience (al-Ṭabarī 1948:59). However, both al-Zamaksharī and al-Rāzī combine and equally prioritise the importance of female obedience to both man and God (al-Zamaksharī n.d.:506; al-Rāzī n.d.: 91-92). In fact, al-Rāzī states that obedience to God and obedience to one's husband are both DEMANDED of the righteous woman (Ibid). He adds that "the woman is not pious who is not also obedient to her husband" (Ibid). Thus women's obedience to their husbands assume sacred proportions.

Al-Rāzī's association of a God-conscious woman as one who is also obedient to her husband introduces a discourse of religious and spiritual hierarchy. The relationship between husband and wife becomes instrumental in the relationship between female believer and God. By suggesting that a religious woman is necessarily an obedient wife, marital hierarchy is prescribed at a religious level. Thus

sacralised male authority and marital hierarchy become foregrounded in the relationship between female-believer and God. In this spiritual hierarchy God occupies the pinnacle, men the centre, as mediators, and women (as well as children and male slaves), the bottom echelon.

The final condition or description of righteous women is that they should *"guard in their husbands absence what God would have them guard"* (Q.4:34). All three exegetes interpret this to mean that a wife must guard her husband's wealth and her sexuality in his absence. The rationale that al-Rāzī provides for this female chastity is two-fold. Firstly female chastity is considered necessary so that the MAN'S honour is not violated and secondly so that she does not give birth to children from seed other than his (al-Rāzī n.d.:92).

The control and ownership of women's sexuality is central to most male interpretations of the verse. Such readings implicitly evoke the sense that the sexual fidelity of wives form an integral part of their religious duty to God. The sacralising of female sexual fidelity can be construed as the elevation of patriarchal sexual politics to the divine realm.

My critique of this part of the exegesis is based on the fact that the ban against female adultery is not premised on a moral imperative of the female believers' relationship with God. Rather, the motivation for her abstinence from adultery is based on the issue of MALE honour and maintaining a pure lineage. Hence, even in the depiction of female piety or spirituality, her sexuality and relationship to men is instrumental. This implies that in terms of women, the God-believer relationship becomes secondary and only accessible via a "correct" man-woman relationship. This inadvertently projects men as divine intermediaries if not demi-gods, as the objects and instruments of female accountability. A feminist critique which is pertinent in this regard is "it is idolatrous to make males more 'like God' than females" (Ruether 1983:23).

Finally, the textual neighboring of women's sexuality and men's wealth as 'objects' for protection continues the narrative of male possession. These are both depicted as the objects to which a husband has sole rights of possession and which are instrumental to his comfort and tranquility (al-Rāzī n.d.:92). Accordingly, women are constructed as the property of men, to be owned and possessed. Such discourses are premised on power relationships of control, male

domination and female subjugation.<sup>14</sup> They function to objectify and dehumanise women, leaving them significantly disempowered. Moreover, the discourse of male ownership allows for unfettered male power which in turn creates the space for the occurrence of legitimate and privatised violence against women. It is precisely this violent potential which is the focal point of the exegesis in relation to the rest of the verse: the issue of solutions or recourses against the "disobedient" woman (*nāshiza*).

#### 4.4. Nushūz as Female "Disobedience"

Having defined the normative woman, the exegetes proceed to deal with the case of deviation from this norm i.e. the instance of aberrance (*nushūz*).

Q.4:34:

*As to those women on whose part you fear (nushūz)  
disloyalty or ill-conduct  
Admonish them (first), refuse to share their beds  
(next)  
and (last) beat them  
But if they return again to obedience  
seek not means against them  
for God is the most high , Great above you.*

Literally "*nushūz*" means to protrude or project out from the ground or a hillock (Ibn Manzur 1981:4425). However, it is metaphorically defined by al-Ṭabarī as "*isti'la'*" which refers to the case where a woman is arrogant, refuses to

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<sup>14</sup>. This relates to the structural discourses of male power extensively discussed in Chapter two.

have sexual relations with her husband or refuses to submit to his authority (1946:62). The classical exegetes begin their discussion of *nushūz* by referring to the cases of *suspected nushuz* (al-Ṭabarī 1948:61). In this case it may be purely subjective male suspicion of female infidelity which may lead a husband to label his wife as disobedient, a *nāshiza*. This suspicion creates the space for irrational and often unjustified male jealousy, which is often among the primary reasons for men beating their wives.<sup>15</sup>

All three exegetes are unanimous that a woman who refuses to have sex with her husband is *nāshiza*. The exegetes then proceed to interpret the Qur'ānic response to female *nushūz*.

#### 4.4.1. Male Response to Nushūz

##### 4.4.1.1. "Verbally admonish them": Fa<sup>ʿ</sup>izūhunna

In their interpretation of the Qur'ānic term *fa<sup>ʿ</sup>izūhunna*, "verbally admonish them" (i.e. the women), all three exegetes suggest that the husband should threaten his recalcitrant wife with God's punishment (al-Ṭabarī 1948:62; al-Rāzī n.d.:92-93; al-Zamaksharī n.d.:506). They suggest

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<sup>15</sup>. This is reflected in the interviews with battered woman which is explored in the chapter six.



that she is to be reminded to fear God and hence refrain from disobedience (Ibid).

This invocation of the presence and fear of God operates as a means of wielding male disciplinary power. The construction of an omnipresent God watching over male interests operates as the means to instill female discipline. Male power, with its appeal to God's constant surveillance, creates self-policing female subjects.<sup>16</sup>

This process is underpinned by the assumption that

...it is more efficient and profitable to place people under surveillance than to subject them to some exemplary penalty (Sarup 1989:73).

#### 4.4.1.2 "Separate them from your nuptial beds": Wahjurūhunna

The next disciplinary measure for persistent female disobedience is that men leave the marital bed. Despite the obvious meaning of literally separating beds, the exegetes' interpretations range from confining the wife in the home (al-Ṭabarī 1948:65), to "abandon" her during sex, that is, refusing to talk to her while having sex with her (Ibid), to

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<sup>16</sup>. This parallels Foucault's understanding of the all-seeing "panopticon", the central guard tower in prisons which is symbolically omnipotent. It creates within the prisoner, the feeling of being under constant surveillance. Thus it serves as a control mechanism which creates internal supervision in prisoners. The concept of the panopticon is discussed extensively in his book Discipline and Punish (1977).

tying her up and forcing her to have sex (al-Zamaksharī n.d:507). This illustrates how a simple recommendation to separate beds, when interpreted by patriarchal lenses, can be construed to mean have sex with a wife even against her will. This is tantamount to marital rape.

Such an interpretation explicitly condones marital rape and epitomises oppressive and abusive gender relations. Male sexuality is depicted as unapologetically omnipotent. There is no male accountability or recognition of the woman as human. It is clear that such a framework which views women as utilitarian "objects" is inherently violent, and explicitly proposes extreme sexual violation and dehumanisation of women.

#### 4.4.1.2.1 Nushūz and female sexuality

As pointed out previously the exegetes interpret the *nāshiza* as the sexually "rebellious" woman. She is either one who refuses to have sex with her husband or one who is suspected of sexual infidelity. In both cases her sexuality is beyond the control of her husband. This preoccupation with controlling a wanton female sexuality is a pervading undercurrent of the medieval Islamic worldview (Malti-Douglas 1991). Fatna Sabbah describes this construction as the "omnisexual women" (1984:34-43). Accordingly, womanhood

is defined as a powerful sexual principle which is threatening, uncontrollable, and potentially anarchic to male order and stability (Ibid). Moreover, her supposedly consuming sexuality is accompanied by an active intelligence or guile (*kayd*) which is solely directed at the maintenance and satisfaction of her libido (Malti-Douglas 1991:51).

Sabbah (1988) and Malti-Douglas (1991) illustrate how classical and contemporary Islamic discourse feared that women's sexual allurements would beguile and distract men from religious devotion. It is in reaction to this threat of the "omnisexual" woman that many discourses of male control are created, including the traditional Muslim ideal of a submissive, docile and obedient women.

The preoccupation with the control of an overwhelming female sexuality once again demonstrates the existence of a dualistic anthropology. Women's existence is determined by biology. She incarnates the "lower" body or sexual principle which needs to be restrained and controlled by the "higher" spiritual and intellectual male principle. Hence the ideal female role is an obedient wife whose sexuality and womb are securely controlled by her husband. I suggest that the inability of classical exegetes to synthesise a unity between sexual, spiritual, emotional and intellectual facets of self has resulted in what Ruether (1983:93) terms "a case

of projection". Accordingly the male exegetes "as monopolisers of theological self-definition, project onto women their rejection of their own 'lower' selves."

(Ibid:94).

This underlying ideology of hierarchical dualism is innately conflictual and when women do not acquiesce to meet their defined roles, the possibility of violence ensues. This is reflected in the interpretation of the final and controversial male Qur'ānic recourse to female disobedience (*nushūz*), that of the *ḍarb*, "to strike", or to "beat".

#### 4.4.1.3. Wadribūhunna: The Beating

The final recourse in the Qur'ānic verse reads

"... *wadribūhunna* (and strike them)" Q.4:34.

Al-Tabari interprets this last resort as "to strike her without hurting her (*gayr mubara*)" (al-Tabarī 1948:68).

Al-Rāzī appears the least prone to offer an endorsement of violence. He interprets this part of the verse by saying that while hitting is permissible, to desist from it is better (al-Rāzī n.d.:93). Here he quotes the *ḥadīth* where the Prophet says that men who beat their wives are not "among the better men" (Ibid). Al-Rāzī suggests that this is a clear indication that it is

preferable not to hit women. He suggests that the rationale for the three-step conflict resolution (first to admonish, then to separate beds and finally to strike) was not a license but rather a restriction on prevalent male violence (Ibid).

Al-Rāzī's interpretation should be understood in the context of a misogynist and machismo culture where men regularly beat their wives.<sup>17</sup> It was considered an exhibition of strength and "manliness" or masculine virility (*murruwa*). In such a context a statement that men who hit their wives were not amongst the "better ones" undermined and countered the prevalent misogynistic values and norms.

Even when al-Rāzī concedes that men may ultimately resort to the *ḍarb*, he attempts to practically abrogate the violence by stating that only a folded handkerchief or *miswāk* (a small twig used as a toothbrush) could be used for such purposes (al-Rāzī n.d.:93). This recommendation implies that

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<sup>17</sup>. Indicative of the "normality" of violence against wives is a *ḥadīth* quoted in the exegesis of al-Zamaksharī. Asmā bint Abū Bakr is reported to have said that "I was one of four wives of Zubair ibn al-ʿAwwām. If he got angry he would hit us with a stick, on which clothes are hung, until he broke it". Her husband is reported to have responded by saying that "if her sons were not around then I would hit her more" (al-Zamaksharī n.d.:507). Hence the evidence points to the fact that the Prophetic society was one where an marked level of violence against wives was prevalent.

the "*ḍarb*" was a token or symbol of male authority, which al-Rāzī appears quite willing to maintain. However it was the substantively violent component of the *ḍarb* which he tried to reduce through interpretation.

Al-Rāzī also states that the husband should not beat his wife on her face for "it is the gathering place of beauty" (Ibid). This is indicative of a paradigm which values women for their appearance. Women's physical beauty serves the aesthetic sensibilities of men and so it is not to be marred. There is no reference to the potential destruction of her emotional and psychological integrity as long as her physical value for men is not reduced.

Al-Zamaksharī, unlike al-Rāzī, is unapologetic about condoning violence in his interpretation of the *ḍarb*. He quotes a *ḥadīth* where the Prophet is reported to have told the husband to "Hang your whip in such a place that the family can see it" (al-Zamaksharī n.d:507). However he concedes that this *ḥadīth* is weak (*da'īf*) since it has a weak chain of narration (Ibid). The assertion and perpetual visibility of male power and control is evidently not only directed at the wife but at the broader family.

This type of interpretation and narrative provides religious legitimacy for a worldview which sanctions violence against

women. For example, even al-Rāzī who makes constant practical recommendations to men to be restrained and prudent still acknowledges the ideology of acceptable male violence against women. As has been illustrated in the last chapter the legitimacy of violence is both systemic and practical. Within this mentality the female body becomes

a political anatomy...where it enters a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it...this mechanics of power defines how one may have a hold of another's body not only so that one may do as one wishes, but also that one may operate as one wishes, with the techniques and efficiency that one determines. This discipline produces subjected and...docile bodies (Foucault 1977:138).

Thus I propose that the narrative and worldview of the exegetes aims at producing docile and subjugated female beings. The "disobedient" woman (*nāshiza*) is seen as aberrant and the religious psychology inherent in the exegesis condones corporal punishment against her. Normativity demands that the female be docile and obedient and the non-conformist who contravenes this order of things needs to be disciplined even if such discipline includes violence.

#### 4.5. The Repentant Woman

The last part of the verse deals with the repentant *nāshiza*:

*...But if they return again to obedience  
seek not means against them  
for God is the most high, Great above you*

In urging men to forgive the repentant woman al-Zamaksharī reminds men that while they may have power over their subordinates, Allah has power over men. He quotes a *ḥadīth* where the Prophet saw a man about to hit a slave with a whip and said: "Oh, Abu Mas'ūd, Allah is more powerful over you than you are over the slave" and consequently Abu Mas ud threw the whip away and freed the slave (al-Zamaksharī n.d.:507).

Equating the status of a woman to that of a slave appears to be a pervading notion in the medieval universe (Malti-Douglas 1991). The medieval Islamic scholar Abu Hamid al-Ghazzali (d.1111) stated that

marriage is "a type of slavery" (*naw' min al-riqq*) and that the wife is the slave of her husband (*raqiqa lahu*) and she is obligated to obey all his orders except for anything that entails sin (cited in Rispler-Chaim 1992:318).

In this stratified and hierarchical worldview men are more human than both free women and slaves. In this context violence against subordinates, whether they are women or male slaves, appears to be acceptable. In fact the medieval Islamic world, as reflected in its general legislative culture, saw the punishment of the body as a normative disciplinary measure for all citizens (Rispler-Chaim 1992:318). However free men were subject to such punishment only within the public sphere, whereas women and male slaves were also subject to such discipline in the home.



Al-Rāzī's commentary on this final part of the verse reasserts a spiritual hierarchy by illustrating the inextricable association between man and God:

Men are not to seek a path against women purely to demonstrate their physical superiority and power, because God is the most powerful. Despite God's exaltation he has not burdened you beyond your capacity of endurance. Therefore do not demand love from your wife when she is unable to do so. God does not continuously punish the repentant sinner once he has returned to obedience. Therefore, if a wife terminates her disobedience and repents, forgive her and do not harbour feelings of vengeance. Finally, despite God's omnipresence, he is content with judging you by your external behaviour and does not hold you accountable for the secrets within your heart. Therefore judge women by their overt behaviour and do not pursue them about their feelings concerning love and enmity (al-Razi n.d:95-96).

This is the most distinct parallel drawn between God and men. While on the surface it is a plea directed at men to be merciful towards women, again the implicit pattern of gender power relations is one premised on structural hierarchy and paternalism.

There is an explicit and primary relationship between men and God and similarly there is an explicit and primary relationship between men and women. Implicitly, the human-God relationship only engages men. In this way al-Razi effectively silences and marginalises the direct relationship between women and God.

Salient amongst the God-images of the classical exegetes are the divine qualities of omnipotence, omniscience, benevolence and absolute dominance. This is evidently paralleled in the positioning of man to woman. Given the above, I suggest that the relationship between men and women is dialectically fashioned on the relationship between men and God. This analogy was also evident in the exegetes definitions of the *qāniṭāt* (righteous) women.

However, a less cynical interpretation could understand al-Razi to be placing limitations on the husband. In terms of the context where violence was normative, the reminder to men that "God is above you" was effectively an attempt to instill in men a sense of accountability. In this way it was aimed at reducing the sense of unfettered power that men enjoyed both psychologically and practically and to deflate, albeit ironically, their 'God-complexes' in relation to women. It is within such a context that commentators interpreted this verse as a restriction on male power. It reflects the contextual realities of male power and female powerlessness. The relationship between meaning and context is thus primary and inextricable.

#### 4.6 Conclusion

In this chapter I have analysed and critiqued a selection of authoritative medieval Qur'ānic *tafāsīr* (exegeses). I began by examining the importance of the Qur'ān in a Muslim worldview and the related significance of interpretation. I then provided a brief outline of feminist hermeneutical methodology. This was followed by an analysis of the medieval exegeses of Q.4:34. It included an examination of firstly, the religious framework of normative gender relations (*qiwāma*), secondly, the constructions of righteous women (*qāniṭāt*), thirdly, the "disobedient" women (*nāshiza*) and finally, the repentant women.

The interpretive discourses of gender employed by classical exegetes provides a window into the gender relations of their socio-historical contexts. Their hermeneutical lenses are evidently created by a patriarchal worldview and thus their interpretations are the ideological products of a male-centred society. These texts constitute the religio-cultural legacy of Islam which provide the vehicle for the reception of the Qur'an in the minds of Muslims. They are instrumental in the transmission of a consciousness and worldview that implicitly and sometimes explicitly legitimates violence against women. The purpose of this chapter was to examine the ideological assumptions embedded

in the authoritative interpretations of the Qur'an. These exegetical studies are indicative of the structural complicity of religion in discourses of violence against women.

However, even within such patriarchal discourses there persists a subversive element. It has been demonstrated how al-Rāzī consistently attempts to abrogate and minimise the violence inherent in *ḍarb* ("beating"). Both al-Rāzī and al-Zamaksharī state explicitly that the verse Q.4:34 functions to place a limitation on the power and authority of men and to restrict their retributive action against their wives. A verse which in contemporary understanding can be seen to create a space for the violation of women, in a medieval context may be arguing to limit the physical violation of women. There is thus a dynamic interplay between context and hermeneutics.

The hermeneutical lenses of the classical exegetes has and continue to inform authoritative Islamic discourses. However their gender ideology and Qur'ānic interpretations are challenged in the contemporary Muslim world. In the next chapter I explore contemporary Qur'ānic exegesis and alternative gender constructions. I focus on the works of two exegetes, Fazlur Rahman and Amina Wadud-Muhsin.

## CHAPTER 4

QUR'ANIC ETHICS AND GENDER EQUALITY: CONTEMPORARY EXEGESIS

*"To know God is to do justice"*

Robert McAfee Brown

1. Introduction

The last chapter presented and critiqued a selection of authoritative medieval interpretations of Q.4:34. A feminist hermeneutic of suspicion was applied to the gender ideology underlying these interpretations. The present chapter offers an alternative hermeneutical approach to the Qur'ān which results in a different "reading" of the text. It focuses on the ethics of transformation and liberation in the text and is based on the contextual hermeneutical approach of Fazlur Rahman. Firstly, Rahman's methodology is outlined. Secondly, an analysis of the exegesis of contemporary Qur'an scholar, Amina Wadud-Muhsin is examined. Following the presentation of the work of these scholars, I offer my own reflections on an alternative Qur'anic gender ideology.

## 2. Rahman: Context, Qur'an and Women

Rahman's (1979) hermeneutical approach to the Qur'ān is premised on a contextualist understanding that the Qur'ānic revelation came to a community which possessed an already established set of norms, traditions and ethics. Moreover the revelatory message was relevant and relative to their circumstances (Ibid). Islamic scholars have shown that the socio-political reality of the original communities which received the revelation were pervaded by patriarchal and kyriarchal norms<sup>18</sup> (Ahmed 1992:45; Hibri 1982:207-212). Rahman (1982) argues that the existence of such power configurations inevitably impacted upon the understanding and interpretation of revelation. The profound impact of the historical moment on the creation of meaning is described by Marx and Engels:

People make their history, ...not under circumstances chosen by themselves but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living (1968:95)

The burden of patriarchal tradition weighed heavily on the seventh century Arabian context at the time of Quranic revelation (Hibri 1982:207-212). Sexism was structurally ingrained into the

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<sup>18</sup>. According to Fiorenza (1994: xxi-xxii) "patriarchy" refers to the reign of the father and "kyriarchy" refers to the reign of the lord/master.

social fabric of the Jāhiliyya period.<sup>19</sup> This was manifest in a number of traditional sexist practices prevalent at the time, for example, female infanticide, unlimited polygamy, forced marriages, and the arbitrary killing of women by fathers or husbands (Ibid; Rahman 1979:38). It was into such a misogynist and patriarchal context that the Qur'ān was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad. This contextual understanding of revelation is vital in examining the relationship between the Qur'ān and prevailing gender ideology.

Rahman states that to expect the Prophet Muhammad to undertake a radical and complete transformation of patriarchal structures was unrealistic (Ibid). He rationalises that no effective reformer can "neglect the real situation and simply issue visionary statements" (Ibid:38). Hence in order to change the social structure, the consciousness and psyche of a people needed to be transformed. Since the rapid introduction of a revolutionary non-sexist agenda in the context of seventh century Arabia would have been unrealistic, a pragmatist approach was adopted instead.

With the introduction of Islam, there was a concrete and urgent attempt to address the numerous abuses against women. These included the prohibition of female infanticide, criminalising the

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<sup>19</sup>. Literally the Jāhiliyya period was the "Period of Ignorance" and was used to refer to the pre-Islamic period in Arabia.

killing of women, the declaration of forced marriages as null and void and providing women with inheritance rights (Hibri 1982:212-214). Other sexist practices which were moderated or tempered included polygyny, arbitrary repudiation and concubinage (Wadud-Muhsin 1992:9). This demonstrates that the introduction of Islam redressed some of the crucial gender power imbalances prevalent in the time.

While these changes were significant in themselves and radical for the time, they were by no means complete. Hence there was a gradual movement from a state of greater patriarchy to a state of lesser patriarchy. I adopt this contextual understanding of Rahman when approaching the interpretation of the Qur'ānic *nushūz* verse (Q.4:34).

The contextual hermeneutical approach of Rahman is articulated in the following way. The Qur'ān is "primarily a book of religious and moral principles and exhortations and is not a legal document" (Rahman 1979:37). Accordingly, Rahman sees a distinction between the spirit and the letter of the law. Whereas the former is considered eternal and absolute, the latter is regarded as dynamic. The letter of the Qur'ān is often understood to be dictated by and embedded within a particular social context. It addresses the immediate needs of a particular spatio-temporal reality which by definition cannot be universalist.



Such an approach proposes a holistic and contextual reading of the Qur'ān. This would enable one to tease out the fundamental principles espoused in the scripture which would fundamentally include the spirit of human equality and justice (Rahman 1982).

Rahman asserts:

Whereas the spirit of the Qur'ānic legislation exhibits an obvious direction towards the progressive embodiment of the fundamental human values of freedom and responsibility in fresh legislation, nevertheless the actual legislation of the Qur'ān had to partly accept the then existing society as a term of reference (1979:39).

Due to inevitable historical changes in societies, Rahman argues that the letter of the Qur'ān needs to be re-negotiated and often reinterpreted in order to reflect its spirit (Ibid).

I will argue that this re-negotiation of the letter of the Qur'an is particularly salient in relation to understandings of gender norms. It foregrounds the relationship between context, revelation and patriarchy. In this regard, Islamic historian Leila Ahmed's research suggests that the impact of Islam on gender relations in the seventh century Arabian peninsula was two-fold (1992:41-78). Echoing Rahman's method, she differentiates between what she terms the pragmatic perspectives of Islam and its ethical perspective (Ibid:62-63). She argues that the pragmatic thrust of Islam facilitated its collusion with elements of the developing patriarchal trend in Arabia and the surrounding environs (Ibid). However its ethical voice stubbornly subverted the very same patriarchy. This crucial tension between

the Qur'ānic spirit and aspects of its letter as well as the ambiguities between the pragmatic and ethical elements is central to my interpretation of Q.4:34.

### 3. Wadud-Muhsin: Context, Qur'ān and Women

A contemporary woman exegete who specifically addresses the issue of woman and gender in the Qur'ān is Amina Wadud-Muhsin. She also utilises Fazlur Rahman's hermeneutical approach in her exegesis (Wadud-Muhsin 1992:3-5). She states that her exegesis,

tends to restrict the meaning of many passages to a particular subject, event or context. These restrictions are based on the context of the verses or an application of general Qur'ānic concepts of justice towards humankind, human dignity, equal rights before the law and before Allah, mutual responsibility and equitable relations between humans (Wadud-Muhsin 1992:63).

This approach is evident in her exegetical work Women in the Qur'ān (1992). I will proceed with a critical analysis of her exegesis of Q.4:34 which forms the basis of my own hermeneutical engagement with the verse and with broader issues of gender ideology in the Qur'an.

#### 3.1. Qiwāma as Mutuality

*Men are (qawwamūn) the Protectors and maintainers of women, because God has given the one more strength than the other, and because they support them from their means (Q.4:34).*

Wadud-Muhsin's interpretation of qiwāma provides an index of her understandings of marital and gender relations in the Qur'an.

Whereas the classical exegetes understood *qiwama* as a relationship of male authority and female dependency, Wadud-Muhsin understands *qiwāma* as a purely functional relationship of material maintenance of women by men in a particular society (Wadud-Muhsin 1992:72). She argues that since child-bearing is a role exclusive to women, it is in the functional interests of equity and justice that men assume financial responsibility. However she states that this arrangement is not an inherent and inviolable one but rather one possibility of a functional and equitable division of labour between men and women. She points out that the Qur'ānic principle or ethical voice in this regard relates to fair human exchange and mutual responsibility. It is these ethics and principles that should determine contemporary marital relationships between men and women (Ibid:73).

Furthermore, Wadud-Muhsin points out that there is no reference in any part of the Qur'ān to male intellectual or even physical superiority (Ibid).

Wadud-Muhsin's definition of *qiwāma* as a relationship of balanced partnership and mutual responsibility between spouses is premised on an egalitarian anthropology which is radically different from the patriarchal anthropologies of the medieval exegetes. The rejection of dualistic anthropological constructs is further apparent in her assertion that child-bearing requires of women great resources of physical strength, intelligence, and deep personal commitment (Ibid). The vision of a physical and

biological imperative of child-bearing being intrinsically related to resources of intelligence breaks down the mind/body dualism evident in patriarchal anthropologies. Hierarchical anthropology is deconstructed when body and mind are not conceptualised as exclusively "lower" and "higher" respective human realms. Wadud-Muhsin presents an integration between the sphere of the intellect and the realm of the body. This depiction of the interrelatedness of human capacities presents an integrated understanding of gendered humanity.

She further defines *qiwāma* as a partnership which is "not restricted to the material, but also [applies] to [the] spiritual, moral, intellectual and psychological dimensions" of spousal existence (Ibid:74). The relationship between men and women is not conceptualised in terms of control, obedience and exclusive sexuality. Women are not primarily positioned within the patriarchal construct of the "bodily" principle. Instead they also belong in the "higher" realm of intellect and spirituality as equal partners to men. Women and men are conceptualised as multi-dimensional beings who relate to each other in the wholeness of their complex humanities. It is this non-hierarchical and egalitarian understanding of *qiwāma* that foregrounds her understanding of the rest of the verse.

### 3.2. The Qāniṭāt: God-conscious women

*Therefore the righteous (ṣāliḥāt) women are devoutly obedient (qāniṭāt),*

*and guard in their husbands absence  
what God would have them guard.*

Wadud-Muhsin's hermeneutical construction of "righteous" women, the *qāniṭāt*, relates to female spirituality. Drawing on the broader usage of this term in the Qur'ān (Q.2:238; Q.33:35), she describes it as a quality of relationship that believers have towards Allah and community: "being co-operative with one another and subservient before Allah" (Ibid:74). This method of contextualising the usage of words in relation to other Qur'ānic verses illustrates her engagement with the text as a whole. In striking contrast to medieval exegetes who associated the term "*qāniṭāt*" with female obedience, she argues that the Qur'ān never orders a woman to obey her husband (Ibid:77). This view subverts the dominant agenda of male power and superiority that underlies the traditional male understanding of these Qur'ānic passages. Since obedience to men is not a criterion for female righteousness, Wadud-Muhsin delegitimizes the entire concept of the punishment of "disobedient" women by men.

Wadud-Muhsin's approach intrinsically subverts understandings of patriarchal power relationships in the text. She challenges the anthropological constructs underlying traditional exegesis by rejecting dualism in her understanding of humanity and asserting the full human dignity of women as independent moral agents. Her interpretation of gender in the Qur'ān reflects a non-

hierarchical theological anthropology which is encapsulated in the following statement:

...there is no inherent value placed on man or woman. In fact there is no arbitrary, pre-ordained and eternal system of hierarchy. The Qur'ān does not strictly delineate the roles of woman and the roles of man to such an extent as to propose only a single possibility for each gender (Ibid:63).

It is this egalitarian mindset that she brings to her understanding of *nushūz*.

### 3.3. Reinterpreting Nushūz

*As to those women on whose part you fear  
(nushūz) disloyalty and ill conduct  
Admonish them (first), refuse to share their beds  
(next) and (last) beat them  
But if they return again to obedience  
seek not means against them  
for God is the most high, Great above you*

Wadud-Muhsin defines *nushūz* as a "disruption of marital harmony". She points out that according to the Qur'ān this state of disequilibrium (*nushūz*) between spouses can be initiated by either partner. She provides evidence for this position by pointing out that Q.4:34 speaks of male *nushūz* and thus the term "*nushūz*" in itself is not female specific (Ibid:75). Therefore according to Wadud, *nushūz* does not mean female disobedience but rather refers to instances of marital conflict.

Wadud-Muhsin interprets the proposed three-step Qur'anic solution in Q.4:34 (*fa'izhūnna, wahjurūhunna, wadribūhunna*) as a means of

re-establishing harmony and not as a disciplinary apparatus. Her argument is advanced in the following manner. Firstly the initial step (*fa'izūhunna*) is understood as a verbal resolution which she says is the most favorable alternative since it is proposed in the case of both male and female *nushūz*. It is consonant with the Qur'ānic principle of *shūra* or mutual consultation which aims at the establishment of peace. She quotes a part of the verse

Q.4:128:

*"it is no sin for the two of them if they make terms of peace between themselves. Peace is better"*  
(Ibid:75).

Wadud-Muhsin's argument in this regard may be subject to the following criticism. She does not acknowledge that the Qur'ānic recommendation of peace is only made in the case of male initiated *nushūz* (Q.4:128).<sup>20</sup> In fact the sole Qur'ānic recourse available to women whose husbands are responsible for *nushūz* is to make peace. There is no explicit parallel invocation of peace to men in the instance of female *nushūz* and Wadud-Muhsin is silent on this issue. In terms of the above, I argue that it is not entirely consistent in terms of a comparison between Qur'ānic verses Q.4:34 and Q.4:128 to suggest that there are equal or mutual options available to men and women in the case of spousal *nushūz*.

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<sup>20</sup>. The entire verse Q. 4:128 reads :  
*If a wife fears desertion or cruelty (nushūz) on her husbands part, there is no blame on them if they make terms of peace between them. Peace is best.*

In addressing the second Qur'ānic recourse (*wahjurūhunna*) which is the separation of beds, Wadud-Muhsin also prioritises the equally mutual implications. She understands this option to provide a "cooling off" period which allows both parties to ponder and deliberate on their differences in a neutral space (Ibid:76).

Wadud-Muhsin's interpretation of the final Qur'ānic recourse (*wadribūhunna*) against the *nāshiza* is ambiguous. She begins by looking at the lexical meaning of the word "*daraba*" stating that it has a range of meaning which does not necessarily imply violence. She refers to the Qur'ānic phrase "*daraba Allah mathalan*"..."Allah gives or sets out an example" (Ibid). Alternatively, she says it is used to describe the instance of setting out or "striking out" on a journey (Ibid). Finally she recognises that it "cannot be overlooked" (Ibid) that *daraba* may mean "to strike". Even in this case, she argues, the word "*daraba*" is distinctly different from its intensive form "*darraba*", the latter indicating repetitive striking or beating. Hence, she sees the verse functioning as an attempt to curtail the socio-cultural conventions of seventh century Arabia where unrestrained violence against women was normative and acceptable.

Wadud-Muhsin therefore reinterprets the three-step recourse so as to extract an ethical vision from the verse. This is evident in the following parts of her exegesis. She suggests that



*fa'izūhunna* is akin to consultation (*shūra*). I argue that there is no evidence in terms of Q.4:34 which suggests that *fa'izūhunna* is a consultative or mutual process between spouses. Similarly, I disagree with her that the second solution (*wahjurūhunna*) has entirely mutual implications for the couple since according to the verse it is the husband who ultimately initiates such a measure. Finally the most appropriate and unanimously agreed meaning of the third solution (*waḍribūhunna*) is "to strike". It seems both evasive and internally inconsistent to offer interpretations such as "setting out on a journey" or "providing an example".

My criticism of Wadud-Muhsin's interpretation in relation to the three-fold Qur'ānic solution of *nushūz* in Q.4:34 is the following: she argues for an ethical basis for the three-step solution and this in turn implies that it reflects the spirit of revelation. While the verse may have had an ethical impetus in restricting excessive violence in seventh century Arabia, I argue that it did so firmly *within* the paradigm of patriarchy. Thus I propose that the Qur'ānic solution to *nushūz* (*fa'izūhunna*, *wahjurūhunna* and *waḍribūhunna*) was a pragmatic and contextually-based compromise.

This Qur'ānic verse illustrates the level at which scripture mirrors its original context and reflects very specific gender norms. It also illustrates the tension in the text between

patriarchy and liberation. I argue that this verse falls into the short-term pragmatic vision of the Qur'ān as opposed to its eternal ethical vision. Hence my criticism is that Wadud-Muhsin's analysis of the Qur'ānic solutions to female *nushūz* obscures the critical tension between revelatory contextualism and ethics.

Wadud-Muhsin (1992:76) asserts that the "problem of domestic violence is not rooted in the Qur'ānic passage" and that such men do not in fact follow the sequential Qur'ānic recourse in attempting to resolve marital conflict. She states that violent men in fact do not aspire to regain peace, their intent is seen as that of injury and damage (Ibid). While I agree with this observation, I reiterate that the Qur'ān shapes and reinforces socio-religious consciousness and understandings of the world, humanity and ideal relationships between people. When such an authoritative text is primarily interpreted by those who are invested in maintaining male hegemony, the *Weltanschauung* of such individuals mediate the text. This in turn can lay the Qur'ān (Q.4:34) open to ideological legitimation of violence against wives by their husbands as was evident in the exegesis of the medieval scholars.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>. The religious legitimation of violence against wives is also examined in chapter seven.

In order to prevent the reading of "Qur'anic violence" it is imperative that alternative hermeneutical lenses be employed in the reading of the Qur'an. While I am critical of some strategies Wadud-Muhsin utilises, I embrace her general exegetical approach as reflective of the Qur'anic ethics of social justice and human dignity. I believe it is this moral impetus which forms the overarching and eternal revelatory impulse. My forthcoming reflections explores this dimension of the Qur'anic ethos.

#### **4. Qur'anic Gender Ideology:**

##### **4.1 A Feminist Perspective**

Thus far I have proposed that specific gender constructs embedded within the Qur'an firstly reflect the patriarchy of the society within which revelation was received. Secondly, such constructs have historically been interpreted by men within a male-centred universe where scholarship primarily reflected male reality. This has been adequately illustrated in the review of the works of the medieval male exegetes.

However, with a change in the socio-historical context, the female voice has claimed the right to interpret the sacred text, as is evident in the exegesis of Wadud-Muhsin. Despite opposition from traditional male clerics, Wadud-Muhsin has challenged the

inroads into areas of visible and recorded scholarship. It is also an indicator of the fact that the arenas of sacred knowledge and power are entwined and, within a contemporary context, open to gender redefinition and negotiation.

The tension between patriarchy and liberation in the Qur'ān depends on the hermeneutical choices of the interpreter. It becomes evident that in the medieval period the prioritisation of the androcentric elements and patriarchal ethos was preferred over the ethical voice of the Qur'ān. This was an interpretive choice that reflected the interests and perspectives of the exegetes in that period. On the other hand, the hermeneutical approach of contemporary female exegete Amina Wadud-Muhsin reflects an egalitarian non-sexist interpretation of the Qur'ān. In other words, interpretive choices are and will continue to be choices of an authority, which are in effect political choices (Sa'id 1983).

It is with a self-conscious political commitment to the liberation of women that I now explore the contours of the hermeneutical tension which deals with the liberatory aspects of the Qur'ānic text. Fazlur Rahman (1979) terms this "the spirit of the text" and Leila Ahmed (1992) terms it "the ethical vision" of Islam.

## 4.2. A Reading of the Qur'ān's Ethical Voice

In defining the ethical voice of the Qur'ān, I propose that the *nushūz* verse needs to be juxtaposed firstly, with other Qur'ānic verses and secondly, with the lifestyle, sayings and practices of the Prophet. The rationale for introducing the Prophetic example is based on the Muslim belief that that his behaviour and lifestyle represented the practical dimensions of Qur'ānic beliefs (Murata & Chittick 1994:29).

### 4.2.1. The Qur'ān

I will begin my discussion on selected Qur'ānic verses by examining specific verses which deal with generic human relations. Here I focus on issues related to firstly, human difference and secondly, to justice. Next I examine verses dealing with marriage and gender relations

#### 4.2.1.1. Human Relations

##### i. Human Relations and Difference

*we have created you male and female, nations and tribes  
so that you may know one another and the best among  
you is one who is most God-conscious (Q.49:13)*

In this verse the major axes of human differences i.e., gender, race and nationality, are presented as challenges for human growth and understandings. These differences are presented as the

creative diversity of Allah which is a gift to human beings, "so that you may know one another", i.e., so that you may constructively engage these differences. Diversity presents an opportunity for human beings to ponder, reflect, and know themselves and their Creator. Significantly, there is no association between gender or racial difference with the specification of social roles or hierarchy.

The last part of the verse is laden with significance. It states that *"the best amongst you is one who is most God-conscious"*. While human beings may have these rich interactive differences, the verse points out that these differences are inconsequential in terms of God-consciousness. Irrespective of human diversity, the best human qualities are nonetheless attainable by all human beings, namely, God-consciousness and spiritual growth. This verse thus affirms human differences as a challenge to human growth and simultaneously emphasises the complete spiritual equality of all human beings, irrespective of gender, race and nationality. Thus the verse both affirms difference as well as rejects any hierarchy arising from such difference. I propose that this verse epitomises what Rahman calls the Qur'ān's "basic moral élan" (Rahman 1979:32).

## ii) Justice

Another verse which provides the ethical guideline for human relations is Q.4:135. This verse appears in the same chapter of the Qur'an as does the nushūz verse Q.4:34.

O ye who believe  
Stand out firmly  
for justice, as witnesses  
to God, even as against  
Yourselves, or your parents,  
or your kin and whether  
it be against rich or poor:  
For God can best protect both  
Follow not the lust  
of your hearts, lest ye  
swerve and if ye  
distort justice and decline to do justice  
verily God is well acquainted  
with all that you do.

This verse defines one of the most important and pervading ethical positions in the Qur'ān. Upholding and defending justice in relation to any human being irrespective of his or her position in the social hierarchy is one of the most revolutionary verses in the Qur'ān. This notion of justice applies in relation to gender and all other hierarchical social dynamics. Justice is the prerogative of all human beings and the Qur'ān effectively stipulates such a pattern of relations between human beings to be essential. Moreover, this is an unconditional appeal to justice since the Qur'ān demands self-vigilance by commanding believers to uphold justice even against themselves.

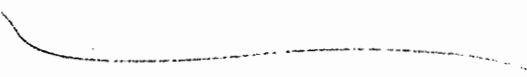
This Qur'ānic ethic of justice is one that I choose to prioritise and one that has the potential to subvert patriarchal biases in the interpretation of the Qur'ān. Consequently, any type of injustice is un-Qur'ānic. Thus men have no Qur'ānic right to claim any privileges over women.

I propose that the above-mentioned two verses dealing with difference and justice provide the Qur'ānic ethical voice. They define appropriate general human relations which includes gender relations.

#### 4.2.1.2. Gender Relations and Marriage

The following selection of verses form the basis for my examination of the ethical voice of the Qur'ān relating to gender relations and marriage.

*For men who surrender unto Allah and women who surrender unto Allah, for believing men and believing women, for devout men and devout women, for truthful men and truthful women, for men and women who are patient and constant, for men and women who are humble, for men and women who give charity, for men and women who fast, for men and women who guard their modesty, for men and women who are God-conscious - for them, Allah hath prepared forgiveness and a great reward (Q.33:35).*





The verses directly addressing the relationship between spouses are as follows:

*"They are your garments and Ye are their garments"*  
(Q.2:187).

*"The believers, men and women are protectors of one another"* (Q.9:71).

*"And of his signs is this, that he created mates for you from yourselves that you may find quiet of mind in them, and he put between you love and compassion. Surely there are signs in this for people who reflect"*  
(Q.30:21).

From the above verses it is clear that there is a definite movement towards the transformation of a sexist society from the pre-Islamic era where women had dubious human value. Islam proposed changes that acknowledged the spiritual and inter-personal persona of women. Particularly in the first verse (Q.33:35) one sees a deliberate attempt to articulate the full humanity of both women and men. Significantly the term "*qanitat*" is also used in this verse referring to the relationship between believers (men and women) and Allah. Moreover, this verse (Q.33:35) challenges patriarchal constructions of the social-spiritual dimension of human relations. It affords full spiritual capacities to women and thus its theological anthropology breaks down the hierarchical dualism between men and women that seems to be reflected in the *nushuz* verse, Q.4:34.

The verses Q.2:187 and Q.9:71 address relationships of intrinsic interrelatedness between men and women. They emphasise mutuality,

intimacy and egalitarian inter-personal relations between men and women as opposed to hierarchy and domination. Love, intimacy and compassion between men and women are seen as gifts from God to humankind (Q.30:21). These gifts are manifest signs of Allah that are presented to human beings for existential reflection:

*"...Surely there are signs in this for people who reflect"*

(Q.30:21). This illustrates the spiritual significance the Qur'an attaches to loving and compassionate relationships between women and men. Thus I propose that the hermeneutical keys to the ethical vision of the Qur'ān are reflected in the above-discussed verses as opposed to the *nushūz* verse (Q.4:34).

#### 4.2.2. The Prophetic Example

My next focus is the translation of the Qur'ānic spirit into the life of the Prophet. The Prophet's behaviour and relationship with women specifically his wives demonstrates a mode of male-female relationships which was radically egalitarian relative to his society. Ibn Sa'd (n.d.:204) reports: "the Prophet never once raised his hand against any one of his wives, nor against a slave nor against anyone". The traditionist, al-Bukhārī, reports one occasion when the Prophet was confronted with a "domestic rebellion" by some of his wives (Khan 1991:3:43:648).<sup>22</sup> He left

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<sup>22</sup>. *Aḥadīth* were located on a computer data base. The reference information follows the following format, eg. Bukhari's ḥadīth in Volume 3 Book 43 Number 648 will be referenced as (3:43:648).

his home and moved into an adjoining room at the mosque for twenty nine days (Ibid). Such a long separation indicates the severity and intensity of the domestic conflict. Yet the Prophet Muhammad never resorted to a physically violent resolution of marital conflict (Mernissi 1991:156).

The Prophet is known to have actively disapproved of violence against wives. According to Bukhāri (8:73:68) the Prophet is reported to have asked: "Would you beat your wives like slaves and then have sexual relations with them in the night?" (Khan 1991). Here the Prophet expresses his disapproval of violence against wives, pointing out the incompatibility between violent hierarchy and real intimacy between spouses.

Afghāni (1945:55-60) records the following sayings (*ahādīth*) of the Prophet:

'He who honours women is honourable, he who insults them is lowly and mean.'

'Treat your children equally. However were I to favour some of them over others, I would favour the females.'

I urge you to treat women kindly. They are a trust in your hands. Fear God in his trust'.

'Never beat the handmaidens of God' (referring to women).

'The best among you are those that are the best to their wives.'

Given the above, the Prophet is seen to have relentlessly advocated the improvement of the status of women. The above extracts reflect both the Prophet's understanding of the dominant

power relations and the oppression of women as well as his attempts to change patriarchal behaviour and consciousness. The Prophet's interpersonal relationships with women bear testimony to his personal commitment to the struggle for gender equity. As a husband, he exemplified a non-violent and non-hierarchical role model within the context of Arabian patriarchy.

The fact that the Prophetic model was viewed as threatening to many men in Medinan community is well illustrated in the following instance. As related by Mernissi (1991:143-144), 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, who was later to become the second Caliph of Islam, was outraged that his wife had questioned him on an issue since he believed that it was inappropriate for women to challenge their husbands. In her defence his wife said that she was basing her behaviour on the Prophetic role model since the Prophet's wives challenged him and differed with him regularly and that the Prophet did not object. Angrily 'Umar hastened to the Prophet for an explanation to which the Prophet responded with a smile implying that he was untroubled by this mode of marital and gender interaction (Ibid).

In the personal life of the Prophet, especially in his relationships with his wives, there is little evidence of oppressive male hierarchy (Haykal 1976). In fact, his wives were active women who obviously claimed the right to freedom of self-expression, who were vocal and assertive, which the Prophet

seemed to have encouraged (Abbott 1942; Mernissi 1991). Unlike Umar, who represented the voice of Arabian male hegemony, the Prophet was not threatened by spirited, questioning women. He did not demand obedience but rather engaged his spouses interactively. If, as Mernissi (1986:98) states, the test of a true revolutionary is to be marked by the quality of his or her intimate relationships with people, the Prophet was certainly not to be found lacking.

It is evident that a shift took place between the pre-Islamic and the Prophetic era. 'Umar al-Khattāb bears testimony to this shift. He is recorded to have said "By God we did not pay attention to women in Jāhīllīyah (pre-Islamic) until God said about them in the Qur'ān what is said, and gave them their share in matters (Afghāni 1945:24).

Even just before his death the Prophet appealed for justice, equality and the respect for the humanity of all people. In his final sermon he stated:

All people are equal, as equal as the teeth of a comb. There is no claim of merit of an Arab over a non-Arab, or a White over a Black person, or a male over a female. Only the God-conscious amongst you merit a preference with God (Abdul Rauf 1977:21).

One sees the numerous teachings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad as directly contradicting many of the prevalent classist, sexist oppressive structures of pre-Islamic society. The Prophet Muhammad may not have been a feminist revolutionary.

but he certainly made a courageous attempt to redress crucial gender power imbalances in the context of seventh century Arabia (Rahman 1979). It is the revolutionary and visionary elements of social justice and human dignity in the Qur'ān and the Prophetic example that represent the ideal goal for the future. I propose that it is these liberatory elements of Islamic history that need to be prioritised since they represent the enduring ethical principles congruent with the broader worldview of Islam.

## 5. Conclusion

I began this chapter by outlining Rahman's contextual hermeneutic to the Qur'ān relating to gender and women. I then provided a critical presentation of Wadud-Muhsin's exegesis on Q.4:34. Finally, based on the approach of these two scholars I offered some personal reflections on the ethical voice of the Qur'ān. In this regard I first examined selected Qur'ānic verses relating to issues of human relations in terms of difference and justice. I then discussed the Prophetic life as an exemplification of the Qur'ānic ethical voice. Finally I offered concluding reflections on the Nushuz verse as representative of a pragmatic and context-bound solution to marital conflict.

In sum, my argument is that the Qur'ānic position (Q.4:34) on violence against wives needs to be historically contextualised. This verse reflects the dynamics of marital hierarchy which was

entrenched in the context of pre-Islamic gender mores. I have shown that the birth of Islam in the seventh century introduced a moral momentum which attempted to change the cruder aspects of an extremely powerful patriarchy. However this momentum towards transformation occurred within the patriarchal paradigm. A revolutionary overthrow of patriarchy did not occur. While Islamic reforms pointed in the general direction of human liberation, they did not immediately realise this ultimate objective. Seventh century Islam aspired towards the ideal of social justice and on several occasions even achieved it, but it was more often limited by pragmatic considerations of context. It was at this level that the *nushūz* verse (Q.4:34) may be understood to reflect and condone marital hierarchy.

In terms of a contextual hermeneutical approach, the verse Q.4:34 represents the pragmatism of the Qur'ān. It reflects a context of normative, excessive and pervasive violence against wives. The notion of imposing a three-step solution to dealing with marital conflict can thus be seen as a restriction on male power. The fact that a procedure was instituted which tried to pre-empt violence was clearly an improvement on previously unrestrained male violence. However such a resolution was ameliorative within a patriarchal context. It should therefore be seen to represent an expedient, short-term and context-bound resolution proposed by the Qur'ān. As such it is firmly rooted within the framework of marital and gender hierarchy even though paradoxically, it was an

attempt to redress and dilute such structures. It does not in fact represent the ethical and long-term vision of the Qur'ān. The ethical voice of the Qur'ān is one that recommends and projects a world in front of the text. Such a world is based on mutuality, human dignity, egalitarianism, and justice. This visionary spirit of the Qur'ān is fundamentally incompatible with the beating and abuse of women by men, or the abuse of any human being.

In my next two chapters I will examine data gathered from interviews conducted with battered Muslim women. In these chapters my objective is to examine the relationship between Islamic discourse and the realities of battered Muslim women.



## CHAPTER FIVE

### FEMINIST QUALITATIVE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

*"What it is know the politics of women's situation is to know...the intimate, private personal spheres of women's lives."*

Margaret Humm.

#### 1. Introduction

The previous two chapters analysed the ideology and politics of interpretation embedded in various readings of gender in the Qur'ān. This analysis focused on the impact of religious discourse on the conceptualisation of violence against wives. The *nushūz* verse (Q.4:34) was used as a hermeneutical key to the various Qur'ānic exegeses on gender relations. It was shown that the different exegetical notions of gendered power-relations reflected an evolving Muslim mindset vis a vis broader religio-cultural frameworks. The tensions between patriarchal and egalitarian Qur'ānic interpretations were explored. These religious and ideological frameworks foreground my forthcoming analysis of contemporary Muslim society.

In order to describe and analyse the practical relationship between religious discourses on gender and the realities of battered Muslim women, a number of battered Muslim ex-wives were interviewed. The rationale for choosing to interview only women is in accordance with the feminist commitment to hearing and recording the voice of women's experience and redressing the

historical male-bias of scholarship (Reinharz 1992:7).

The next two chapters, chapters five and six, are interrelated. This chapter outlines and describes the research methodology I employed in the process of interviewing battered women. The next chapter provides a discussion and analysis of the results of these interviews. In my discussion of methodology I present a feminist critique of the historical male-bias of positivist research methods. This is juxtaposed with a discussion of feminist qualitative research which is employed in the interview process of this thesis. Following this is a description of the interview process.

## **2. Methodology for Qualitative Research**

The methodology employed in this study is premised on feminist epistemology. In a radical departure from "male stream" positivist research methodology which generalises knowledge systems originating in purely male experience, feminist research methods seek to generate knowledge systems emerging out of women's experience (Angless 1990:3). In order to situate feminist research and the knowledge systems that it seeks to transform, it is necessary to provide a brief survey of the dominant patriarchal modes of knowledge production.

Positivism has pervaded most of the prevalent discourses in the

social and natural sciences.<sup>1</sup> Positivist research has historically made claims to value neutrality, objectivity and the production of pure knowledge and universal "truth" (Reinharz 1992:7). As described by Patti Lather the positivist era is defined by "...the quest for a "god's Eye" perspective, the confrontation of what Bernstein called "Cartesian Anxiety", the lust for absolutes, for certainty in our ways of knowing" (1988:570).

At the same time patriarchal positivist research has systematically excluded women from the knowledge base and served the interests of patriarchy (Spender 1985:5-6). This type of research has been used as an instrument in the domination and legitimation of male power elites, and the fortification of sexist social constructs (Fonow & Cook 1991:73). Androcentric knowledge-power constructs have been maintained and perpetuated by positivist notions of absolutes, and the creation of totalising discourses and "regimes of truth" (Lather 1988:570).

Historically positivist quantitative research has fractured and reified reality, human behaviour, and ideas into quantifiable phenomena which are observed and studied by a dispassionate

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<sup>1</sup>. Positivism as a philosophical doctrine originated in the work of Auguste Comte (1798-1857). According to this doctrine it is possible to have knowledge only about things that can be observed and that are therefore amenable to scientific investigation (Sutherland 1989:334). Positivism excludes any references to "subjective" constructs like the emotions, metaphysics, etc.

outsider (Ibid:570-72). The richness, complexity and contextuality of human behaviour is discounted. Moreover this rational, objective science has dismissed emotions as an impediment to "good" science, reflecting the "pure" or "unaffected" values of traditional white male culture (Oakley 1981:40).

Intrinsically related to this research mindset is a particular understanding of human interaction within the research process. The researcher seeks the "truth" about the "object" of the research with the required distance between the researcher and the researched (Mies 1993:66-67). This particular relationship between the researcher and the researched is embedded in a hierarchical mode of engagement. The researcher is considered the "expert" who elicits the requisite information from the research "object" (Stanley & Wise 1990:21-24). The power dynamics implicit in this type of research relationship operates from the understanding of human beings as objects to be exploited for research purposes (Mies 1993:66-67). This type of research has been accurately termed "Rape Research" where the creation of knowledge and career advancement of researchers are built on the use of alienating and exploitative inquiry methods (Lather 1988:574).

The ideological goal of feminist research in the social sciences is to subvert and challenge the givens and the truths of male "objectivity" (Roberts 1981:16). It attempts to create a space

for the authentic articulation of female voices and experience. There is the commitment to remedy the pervasive invisibility and distortion of female experience and thus revolutionise an oppressive status quo. The commitment of feminist research to be a transformative intellectual undertaking is paramount in that it seeks to destabilise "formerly secure foundations of knowledge" (Lather 1988:576). It is here that the importance of qualitative research in feminist epistemology emerges. As an exercise in empowerment, the use of qualitative research methodologies in feminist research seeks to enable women to describe their realities in their own terms and to document women's own accounts of their lives (Oakley 1981:48). It is necessarily and vitally subjective, desiring to examine meaning in terms of the participants in that reality. Feminist research attempts to avoid imposing analytical categories on human experience but rather argues for an approach "not only located in, but proceeding from the grounded analysis of women's material realities" (Stanley & Wise 1990:21).

Unlike patriarchal knowledge which is based on the experience of the generalised male "norm", feminist knowledge is based on the understanding of the complexity and contextually-bound nature of human (both male and female) experience. Feminist research rejects patriarchy's imposition of (male) universals, an absolute truth and other such totalising discourses. It constantly acknowledges the importance of including all human experience as

valid. Hence the

methodological tasks for feminist researchers have become generating and refining more interactive, contextualised methods in the search for pattern and meaning rather than for prediction and control" (Lather 1988:574).

Central to feminist research is the notion of praxis-oriented research aimed at producing emancipatory knowledge (Fonow & Cook 1991:74-79). There is a strong belief that the detached, "spectator knowledge" is to be dislodged by one that is defined by active participation in the social and political struggles of women (Mies 1993:67).

The transformation of the status quo is not just the ultimate goal of feminist research but is also part of the process or the manner in which the research is conducted (Reason & Rowan 1981:33-35). Hence the research relationship or interview is viewed as a "co-operative inquiry" which provides an opportunity for participants in the research to collectively direct the process (Mies 1993:68). It is based on entering into a relationship where both parties invest of themselves. Connection and empathy are viewed as modes of knowing (Reinharz 1992:24). The research process thus provides an opportunity for the conscientisation of both researcher and researched (Ibid). An equally important means of empowerment in the research process is the sharing of knowledge with interviewees (Reason & Rowan 1981:35).

The embracing of a "conscious partiality" on the part of the interviewer allows for identification with the subject and such subjectivity or rather "intersubjectivity" is central to the validation of the interviewee's experiences (Mies 1993:67). The powerful construction of interviewer as a neutral expert positioned over and above other women's experience is hence dislodged. Open-ended questions and in-depth interviewing are particularly helpful in that they empower the interviewee in allowing her to determine her own level of disclosure (Oakley 1981:56). Heron (1981) states:

if we uphold the moral principle of respect for others, power should be shared not only in the application of knowledge but also in the generation of such knowledge (cited in Angless 1990:61).

The transformation of power-imbalances is central to feminist research. It is "passionate" or "engaged" scholarship, and a movement away from vertical and hierarchical scholarship to horizontal and communal scholarship (Reinharz 1992:181). These ideological commitments marked my approach and practise in the interviewing of battered women.

### **3. The Socio-Historical Context of Interviewees**

The women that I interviewed for this thesis were survivors of violent physical abuse by their husbands or ex-husbands. All participants were South African who lived in the greater Cape Town area. These Muslim women were of either Indian or Malay

heritage, which is shared by the majority of South African Muslims who number approximately a half million in the country (Moosa 1995:151).

Historically Islam's entry into South Africa was twofold. The first Muslims arrived in the Cape shortly after 1652 (Esack 1992:164). They hailed from the Malaysian Archipelago and came to the Cape as labourers, exiles and political prisoners of the Dutch colonists (Ibid). Among the early founders of Islam at the Cape were individuals like Shaykh Yusuf of Macassar (d. 1699), Shaykh Madura (d. 1754), Tuang Guru (d. 1807) who assumed the mantle of religious leadership at various periods (Moosa 1995). Their Sufi affiliations were responsible for the early establishment of various Sufi orders in the Cape. Despite severe repression of Islam by the Dutch authorities, Islamic teaching and propagation among indigenous people persisted.

The arrival of indentured labourers and "passenger" Indians in Natal in 1860 marked the beginning of the second significant impact of Islam in South Africa. Indentured Indian labourers were contracted to work on the sugar cane fields in Natal while the "passenger" Indians were groups of immigrants who paid for their passage to South Africa (Moosa 1995). Many of the latter also settled in the Transvaal and the Cape. Due to more favourable socio-economic factors in Natal and the Transvaal, mosques and *madrassahs* (religious schools) were built and missionary work was



undertaken (Ibid).

The growth of Islam in South Africa thus emerged from a twofold historical phenomenon. Firstly, the banishment of prisoners and slaves from the Malaysian Archipelago to the Cape in the 1660's and secondly, the entry of Indian labourers and immigrants in the 1800's. It is from this historical context that the initial Muslim communities in South Africa were born. Islam was also embraced by sectors of the indigenous African communities and thus contemporary Islam in South Africa assumes a *mélange* of cultural expressions. This synopsis provides a brief historical contextualisation of the communities to which interviewees in this study belong.

#### 4. The Interview Process

Contact was made with participants through the assistance of NICRO Women support centre and Bait-ul Noor.<sup>2</sup> Arranging the interviews was more difficult than anticipated. Some women with whom interviews were requested refused because they did not want to relive their experiences. However the women who agreed to be interviewed were willing to share their experiences in the desire to break the silence around wife-battery. Eight in-depth

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<sup>2</sup>. NICRO has been alluded to in chapter one. Bait-ul-Noor is a community social service centre which, amongst other things, provides shelter and counselling services for battered Muslim women.

interviews were conducted. The interviews were based on asking interviewees open-ended questions from a loosely structured interview schedule. Previously I had jointly drawn up the interview schedule with two other women, both of whom had worked as counsellors to battered woman. One of them was also a survivor of wife battery from a previous marriage. Hence the feminist principles of consultation, transparency and full participation in the creation of knowledge was adhered to.

Seven of the participants were separated or divorced and one was still married, although she was also contemplating divorce. The venue of the interview was determined by what the interviewees found most suitable and convenient. Four of the interviews were conducted at my home and the others at the home of the interviewees. Confidentiality was guaranteed.

Each interview lasted between three to four hours and was audio-taped with the consent of the interviewees. The procedure that was used involved asking the women open-ended questions. Open-ended questions created the opportunity for interviewees to direct the interview process and determine their own levels of self-exposure. Thus the feminist postulate of empowerment during the research process was adhered. Moreover, the open-ended questions and in-depth discussion created the space for women's voices and an authentic self-definition of their experiences as opposed to the imposition of a structured questionnaire. The

reader is notified that there is no attempt to offer a statistical analysis or the generalisability or external validity of the study. Finally interviews were transcribed and analysed for common themes.

I made arrangements with NICRO Women's Support Centre in the event that any of the women needed counselling facilities after the interviews. Interviewees were also informed of the more long-term possibility to join a battered woman's support which was already operating at the NICRO centre.

#### 5. Identifying Data of Interviewees

All the names provided are pseudonyms so as to ensure confidentiality.

1. Anisa, 40 years old. Married for 17 years. Divorced for the past 3 years. 5 children.
2. Shamima, 28 years old. Married for 5 years, contemplating divorce. 2 children.
3. Tasneem, 32 years old. Married for 6 years. Divorced for the past 2 years. 1 child.

4. Maryam, 43 years old. Married for 20 years. Divorced for the past 3 years. 3 children.

5. Jaynub, 35 years old. Married for 6 years. Separated awaiting divorce. 2 children.

6. Fatima, 33 years old. Married for 13 years. Divorced for 2 years. 3 children.

7. Farida, 29 years old. Married for 8 years. Separated awaiting divorce. 2 children.

8. Shayda, 42 years old. Married for 23 years. Separated awaiting divorce. 4 children.

## 6. Conclusion

This chapter provided a feminist methodological framework employed in the research process of interviewing battered wives. I also provided a brief description of the research process, the socio-historical context and profile of the interviewees.

Feminist qualitative research methodology is particularly valuable in a number of ways. The central commitment to creating the spaces for women's voices is vital in the pursuit of women's empowerment. It is vigilant against the imposition of

unrepresentative analytical categories on women's experiences. Qualitative feminist research attempts to redress the historical marginalisation and invisibility of women in the generation of knowledge. As praxis-orientated research it merges academia with the active participation in the transformation of sexist social and political structures. Such egalitarian and transformative goals do not only characterise the content of feminist research but also informs the process of knowledge acquisition. Thus the research process is marked by the commitment to empowering and non-exploitative procedure. Feminist methodology promotes the notion of relevant, accountable and transformative research.

The next chapter focuses on the analysis of the research findings derived from the interviews with battered Muslim women. The chapter will take the form of a discussion drawing connections between previously discussed theoretical issues and their practical implications.

## CHAPTER 6

BATTERED MUSLIM WOMEN SPEAK: VIOLENCE, MALE POWER AND ISLAM

*"If rapists are the shock troops of patriarchy then  
batterers are its army of occupation"*

Dobash and Dobash

### 1. Introduction

The last chapter provided the methodological framework for the process of interviewing battered women. This chapter presents a description and analysis of the experiences of battered Muslim women as derived from the interviews conducted in the Western Cape, South Africa in 1994. The women's experiences as recorded in the transcribed interviews were analysed for common themes. Three major thematic categories emerged from this analysis. They are as follows:

- 1) Violence, Sexuality and Male power.
- 2) Female Identity, Religion and Socialisation.
- 3) Religious Authority.

These categories do not represent discrete experiences. Rather they are artificially imposed for heuristic purposes. The themes often overlap and inform one another.

## 2. Violence, Sexuality and Male Power

### 2.1. Narratives of Violence

I had bought groceries and two cheap stools at Hypermarket. Then he kept asking me why I had bought the stools, that I shouldn't have bought the chairs...I got this feeling, this horrible feeling that you know what's going to come your way, later on, sitting and waiting. He waited nicely for all the children to go and sleep and I was reading and he kept on asking about the groceries, and saying to me "Why did you buy this? Why did you buy that?." I even stopped answering because I was too scared, I could see it in his eyes. All the children were asleep, there's no-one, no witnesses...and he took a stick, like the one on a broom and started hitting me with that. I managed to run out and I fell in the drive-way. It was raining and dark outside. I managed to grab for the stick from him and I knocked his specs off and they broke. He went inside and brought out a gun, and he aimed the gun at me, this self-defence gun, but thank God the trigger stuck...and so he hit me on the face with the gun, on my cheek and my cheek was swollen and burnt. If it had to go in my eyes, I wouldn't have been able to see. It was raining and two ladies came past in a car. They saw and stopped and when they stopped the car he ran inside and locked the door and I was outside in the rain. It was 12 'o clock at night, and in the rain, you know. And, I was so worried, I was so scared about my children being inside, locked up with him... (Fatima).

Just in the last three months I had a hole in my head twice! The first time five stitches, and just after that six stitches the way he was hitting me and cutting me with a knife (Anisa).

Here there are scars on my back, it's a lifetime's scars, he used to regularly whip me with the lead wires, you know the extension leads (Maryam).

He hit me in my face, put his hands around my neck and he strangled me and I passed out, that night I feared for my life (Farida).

These excerpts reflect the extreme levels of violence and

aggression that many battered women are subjected to in their marriages. Such experiences reveal the violent potential of male power and female powerlessness within patriarchal marriages. The extreme nature of these male-female power imbalances is mirrored in the common fear of many of the interviewees of being killed by their spouses. Their experiences bear testimony to the brutality of patriarchy as it manifests in the everyday lives of many women. The phenomenon of wife battery is one that is intrinsically related to the gendered power locations within marriage.

## **2.2. Marital dynamics and Male Power**

All the interviewees stated that their husbands authority was the single most important determinant of marital dynamics. The following discussion reflects that the husbands' authority seemed to be directed at the systematic economic, psychological and social alienation of their wives.

### **2.2.1 Economic and Occupational Issues**

Two thirds of the respondents' husbands had forced them to leave their jobs once they were married. It was evident that the husbands used their economic power to ensure their wives' dependence on them in a practical manner. Abusive husbands also demonstrated a strong antagonism to the educational aspirations



and achievements of their wives by deliberately creating obstacles to their intellectual and academic progress. This is demonstrated in the following excerpt:

When I was young already, I knew what I wanted out of life. Whatever I did, I made a success of it and he tried to break it down because he could see I had these qualities in me actually. For example, I used to go to part-time night classes, and he never wanted me to do that. He never gave me the car, I had to walk in the dark to the bus-stop, I had to run down that hill, because it's dark and it's scary...those are the things I had to go through because, I mean I had a right, I still have a right to education and this man just wants to take it away from me. As the years went by, I just thought that I'm just going to do it. I feel I wanted to and I have a right to education. I was working so I paid for my studies myself. It was difficult because he always put obstacles in my way. Once he burnt all my books, he made a big fire outside in the drum and he tore up my books and burnt them including all my notes. Then, I lied to one of the students and I asked him if I couldn't make copies of his notes and I still pushed on and finished that course. It's horrible to go through that (Shayda).

The experience of female intellectual empowerment as threatening is consistent with the general patriarchal religious worldview as conceived in the classical exegesis. Accordingly, the ideology espouses that knowledge is the domain of men. Women's entry into the terrain of knowledge and education is resisted since it could potentially subvert the power relationships of male authority, especially if the husband is not equally educated. Angless (1990:81) points out that

when husbands fail to surpass their wives in personal "resources" such as intelligence or occupational prestige, they may fall back on the ultimate resource of physical force to maintain their superiority.

Shayda's statement reflects her perseverance and unwavering

belief in her right to education despite her husband's active opposition. It also discloses the potential for agency and transformation that women possess. She resists dominant stereotypes and actively assumes responsibility for her own development.

### 2.2.2. Psychological and Social Alienation:

The majority of interviewees emphasised that their husbands systematically isolated them from other people. The consequent sense of loneliness and alienation is revealed in the following excerpts:

For a whole year after the wedding I told nobody about the violence. If he was out somewhere he use to take a part out of the car so that I couldn't go anywhere. So I had to stay alone. There were no friends, nobody, and I didn't have children that time so I was absolutely alone, very lonely. Then he used to go off and say that he was going to study, and I just had to accept it. He came home late and I was too scared to say anything (Farida).

He didn't like to see me with other people, I had no friends because friends were not allowed. What he wanted was myself and him and our children, just us, nobody else (Shamima).

The above examples suggest that the patriarchal conception of family as "private" contributes to the psychological and social alienation of battered women. This privatisation of family pre-empted "outside" interference in the personal sphere of the family. Such a separation between the private family and the socio-political "outside world" maintains the "domestic" facade

of wife battery, thus depoliticising it from broader socio-political gender dynamics. Hence, there is a systematic silence woven around the violence that may be perpetrated within the "private" space of family. This silence sustains abusive and violent marital relations. It prevents the battered woman from accessing social resources and support. Moreover the isolation often results in her perception of her situation as shameful, unique and as her fault. This is evident in the following statement:

I felt incredibly ashamed in the relationship. I didn't want to admit it to anyone, I felt responsible, he made me feel responsible. He was saying: "you made me do that" and while intellectually I was telling him: "Rubbish! It was you, your hand that did it", inside I was thinking that I was an unacceptable person and secretly responsible (Tasneem).

At least six of the women interviewed assumed a degree of responsibility for their dysfunctional relationships. Often it was only after they had consulted with other people that they realised that their husbands were ultimately responsible for resorting to violence. This reflects the patriarchal stereotypes discussed in chapter three which attribute responsibility for "smooth" marital relationships to women (Friedman 1979:13). Women are measured through their success in marriage and family and so constantly assume responsibility in trying to sustain relationships (Eichenbaum and Orbach 1983:175).

Finally one interviewee's discovery of female solidarity against wife battery was very empowering. She describes the incident as

follows:

One day at work, my colleague, actually she is the director of the firm, noticed the bruises on my arm and asked me what it was. I said that it was nothing. I am not the kind of person that goes around telling people, it's embarrassing and shameful. She told me not to lie, and that I was not the only person. She too was abused by her husband and so was our financial director who is also a woman. I was so shocked because they are such different people. That gave me a lot of courage to do something cause they had got out, and it had happened to the best of people (Anisa).

When women realise that the problem of abuse is not unique to them and that solidarity and support exist among other survivors of abuse, they are encouraged to change their situations.

Solidarity reduces experiences of shame and guilt and encourages battered women to effect changes in their situations (Angless 1990:102). Many of the interviewees, in reflecting on their experiences of marital violence, focussed on the purported reasons for their husbands' violence. These will now be outlined.

### 2.3. "Reasons" for violence

In terms of the causes of violence, two major issues emerged as salient. The first commonly experienced "cause" of violence related to disagreements between spouses.<sup>3</sup> The second was associated with the husbands' jealousy.

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<sup>3</sup>. I reject the notion of attributing the cause of violence to the battered woman.

### 2.3.1 Daring to Disagree

The beating became a regular thing, it started happening every month. I knew already before the month was over I was going to get a hiding. I became too scared to even talk to him. Sometimes I would be talking to him normally and I would maybe say this is white and he would say it is black, and if I don't agree he would start hitting me. But there was no argument and that's what shocked me because there was no argument and all of a sudden this man was on top of me and hitting me and I wouldn't know why (Maryam).

He's a bossy man, now if he says sit, you must sit, if he says stand, you must stand, if he says go sleep, you must go sleep, if you don't listen he gets violent (Shamima).

In the above descriptions male violence was triggered in situations where wives held different opinions to their spouses. This "rationale" or "cause" of violence is symptomatic of the nature of power relations within the marriage. The man defines and dictates the nature of reality and any opposition to this order is met with violence. This indicates an underlying worldview which positions men as natural leaders and women as the always obedient and submissive followers. Any opposition to the authority of men is not tolerated. The "natural" resort to violence within such an order of reality was reflected in the following interaction between Farida and her batterer:

"He says to me 'Ja! (Yes!) you are not a battered woman, you deserve to be hit'".

This echoes a mindset of justifiable male violence which

resonates with the discourse of medieval Islamic exegetical studies. However while the latter suggested a three-fold recourse to female disobedience, these men resorted to violence at any instance of perceived female "disobedience" (*nushūz*).

### 2.3.2. Jealousy and Possession

The second reported catalyst of male violence related to male jealousy. Most of the women said that their husbands were extremely possessive, often dictating their behavior and interactions with other people and monitoring and restricting their movements. Moreover physical abuse was often related to some suspicion of past or present infidelities. This is the same mentality that one finds in the exegesis where the disobedient woman (*nāshiza*) was one who was suspected of infidelity, "one who you fear in her manner when she leaves the home" (Tabarī 1948:61). One interviewee reported:

He wasn't at all jealous or possessive during our courtship. It only started when we got married. Suddenly rules were set down like, I couldn't wear make-up, I had to wear a scarf, no jeans. He said: "Now you are a married woman and married woman don't dress like that, religion-wise and everything". I couldn't go anywhere alone, I couldn't even go to my mother's and he demanded to go with me. If I wanted to go with friends they had to ask him. Shopping, hairdressers, whatever, he had to go with me. He went through my bag regularly. Also I had to give up my job. I had no freedom in my marriage, it was like being in a prison. Every time we had an argument there was physical abuse. and every week we had an argument and so every week there was abuse and you get use to it ...whenever I walked out he would come and beg me to return and I would go back (Fatima).

The above description illustrates how the element of jealousy relates to possession and control. Accordingly, marriage apparently entitles the husband to assume rights of ownership and rulership over his wife. The husband raised the specter of religious authority as a means of asserting his legitimate right to assume control and leadership. Her physical appearance and related sexuality are perceived to belong to the husband who jealously protects and controls both. There is no negotiation between the spouses regarding the meaning of particular dress codes in relation to Islamic notions of modesty or its impact on them as independent religious people. Instead, orders and rules are imposed on the woman as soon as she assumes the role of a Muslim wife.

The husband's insistence that his wife give up her job effectively excludes her from any realm of independent and "unsupervised" interaction with other people as well as from economic independence. This has the effect of alienating her from any resources of support or resistance to his control. If she dares to disobey she is beaten into submission. The marital power dynamics are premised on the construction of woman as firstly, an object to be possessed by man and secondly, as a "minor" who is incapable of autonomous religio-moral agency. This interviewee describes her experience of the comprehensive lack of freedom in her marriage as "a prison".

## 2.4. Sexual Jealousy, Sexuality and Violence

### 2.4.1. Sexual Jealousy

Sexual jealousy appeared to be a major theme in the marital relationships of many interviewees. Shayda reports:

For 16 years he has accused me of sleeping with another man before we got married. He says that I slept with this other man and then he forces me to tell him that this other man took my 'izzat (honor) away. He stands in front of me and hits me until I tell him what he wants to hear. He says I musn't take him for a poep (lit:fart). But it's not true and he knows in his heart that it's not true. He said to me that man took the front part, the best part and now he had to take the back part, what was left over. After that first time the revenge was building up in him cause he thought that the other man got the best part and that he thought that he was going to get married to a good Muslim girl who will give her everything only to him, but I only gave a part...then he beats me up badly, then he just uses me, no matter how badly I am hurt he says it must be over and he wants to sleep with me.

In this case the husband defines his wife's value in terms her sexuality. The term 'izzat (meaning 'honor' in Arabic), metaphorical for virginity, is one that is imbued with religious meaning. The construction of female worth (i.e., the concept of a "good Muslim girl") is entirely contingent on her 'izzat, a euphemism for her virginity. Her honor and religiosity and hence her worth is defined by the state of her sexuality. She is valuable and honourable only if her husband has exclusive rights to the control of her sexuality. The possibility that she has had sex with another man also impugns her husband's honour since he



views her as his sexual property.<sup>4</sup> Ironically in this case the husband has had an extra-marital adulterous relationship but does not apply the same religious value-judgement on himself as lacking "izzat". Sexual double standards and different criterion for male *vis-a-vis* female "morality" is characteristic of patriarchal gender stereotyping (Smart & Smart 1978:4).

Implicit in the husband's accusation is the notion of his wife's sexual deceit. According to him she misrepresented herself as a "good Muslim girl" who was sexually untouched. This resonates with the insights of Fatna Sabbah who points out that in classical Islamic discourse women's overwhelming sexual power is equalled only by her capacity to manipulate and deceive (1984:34-43). The coercive element of the power dynamics is further reflected in his constant demands for a confession of her sexual "guilt". This is an attempt to humiliate her and reduce her self-worth.

The pressure to make false admissions at the threat of violence is reminiscent of the psychological dynamics between torturer and political detainee (Foster 1987:84). After demanding a confession he beats her and then has sex with her. Thus sexuality is associated with power dynamics of psychological degradation and physical violence. The batterer's economy of power and pain

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<sup>4</sup>. Medieval exegete Razi also argued that one of the most important rationales for female chastity is to prevent the violation of male honour (n.d.:92).

directed at his wife is nothing more or less than the "deconstruction of (her) humanness" (Chidester 1991:81).

#### 2.4.2. Sex and Violence

The association between sex and violence was found to be common among all the interviewees. The following extracts are illustrative:

When he wants me in bed then I must be there and if I'm not then all this frustration builds up and then he just gives me a hiding...so I can't refuse him because if I refuse him then he gets mad, he goes berserk, just beats me up (Shamima).

After the abuse he would want to have sex with me, I mean how do you? I mean you just feel hurt now, how in the world can you still have, or even think about having sex? He just forced his way. What could I do ? (Maryam).

I don't feel like it sometimes you know, you are so tired and then he just wants to sleep with me. Then what can I do? I just have to...and there is no satisfaction in it...but just to please him (Anisa).

These descriptions point to the manner in which the sexual utility of women is most salient to batterers. The gratification of their sexual drive is primary. There is no apparent recognition of the woman as a sexual partner. She is sexually objectified and her sexual satisfaction appears to be irrelevant. Such gendered sexual constructions are reinforced by a patriarchal ideology which comprehensively positions women in relation to male priorities and desires.

Many of the women reported their batterer's desire for sex after the violence. The deviant association of sexual arousal with violence is indicative of a pattern of sexuality that is based on control and domination. In the aforementioned cases it is indicated that abusive men become sexually aroused and derive pleasure from their acts of violence against their wives. One interviewee described the masochistic pleasure her husband derived from violating her: "when he beats you up badly, he never feels sorry, it's almost like he gets lekker (feels good), sometimes he even laughs!" The translation of female pain into male power characterises the misogyny of wife battering. Moreover the batterer frames sexuality in relation to his power and his wife's powerlessness, and to his desire and her pain. Sex thus provides a further domain for the perpetration of violence and violation.

In all the above cases there is evidence of forced sex and/or coercion. Anisa's perception that she "just has to (have sex), what can I do?" illustrates her internalisation of patriarchal understandings that women must always be available for men's sexual needs. More importantly it indicates the futility of resistance in a marriage where violence is an always imminent possibility. While none of the women used the term "rape" in relation to forced sex, their descriptions point to regular experiences of marital rape. However, when asked whether their husbands had raped them, only one woman answered in the

affirmative which suggests that for many forced sex during marriage is not thought of or termed as "rape". This is premised on the understanding that sexual consent is implicit and automatic within marriage. This understanding has also informed the South African legal structures which only acknowledged marital rape as recently as 1993.<sup>5</sup>

#### 2.4.3. Female Construction of Sexuality

The way in which women experience and construct their sexual relationships is evident in the following excerpts:

You know our sexual relationship...God! its just opkap en klaar (he just gratifies his sexual needs and then it is finished). You know for a woman it's different, you must be loving towards your wife first and then have sex afterwards...but he wasn't like that. He just used me and then its over not even three minutes and it's finished.... He never even asks me what I want, I just bear it till he is klaar (finished) (Fatima).

I feel sex is also important, it's part of marriage, it's something also sacred, it's something that you got to respect, but in my case, it's was not done out of love and respect (Farida).

I have been experiencing this deep emotional and sexual hunger, this tremendous emptiness, for so long in this marriage (Tasneem).

These women personally associate sexuality with mutual love and emotions. However, they recognize the absence of these elements

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<sup>5</sup>. Marital Rape was recognised as a crime in South Africa by the 1993 Prevention of Family Violence Act. Section 5 of the Act reads: "Notwithstanding anything to the contrary contained in any law or the common law, a husband may be convicted for the rape of his wife" (Human Rights Watch 1995:107).

in their own sexual relationships. The subsequent experience of a lack of sexual fulfillment and mutual enjoyment is salient for these women. Shayda's description of her husband's sexual manner as "opkap en klaar" and "he just uses me" reveals the way in which the violence and objectification is experienced in existential terms. Nonetheless she states that "a woman needs love" - she (and the other women quoted above) do not accept that sexual domination and violence are normal. They are acutely aware of the injustices and "abnormality" of their sexual relationships. Such an awareness is also reflected in the following extract:

You know, what surprises me is that even after sexual intercourse, that's the time, normally what I would expect naturally for husband and wife to be loving, that sex will bring them closer together...not in my case, he was brutal and he was rude, and I couldn't understand it. I actually had sex with him because I thought he's going to be soft and gentle and loving but not him, he was rude and brutal and it shocked me. It made me feel dirty, it made me feel miserable, it made me feel..., I can't explain to you what I felt, but that's how I felt afterwards, because he was very rude and just made it ugly (Anisa).

The lack of emotional intimacy and sharing in the sexual relationship has negative psychological implications on women. The notion of being tainted and soiled by sexual abuse is embedded within an interactional space of female powerlessness and dehumanisation. This sense of violation also emerges from the following excerpt:

Sex is very perverse. For one thing, he always wants anal sex. It's like nothing I've ever known. It's very unpleasant and he didn't stop when I wanted him to stop and I'm bleeding, he's just got this type of attitude

of sex as a commodity. He's never really cared about my satisfaction. It's just a very unloving relationship from his side (Tasneem).

He wanted to go and watch pornography movies with me when we were at the holiday resort, and I saw about two minutes of it and I left, and he was furious with me and beat me up (Shayda).

Here the view of sex as a commodity associated with fetishes is related to peculiar and "perverse" male desire inflicted upon women. In such relationships women are solely functional in male sexual gratification. Sexual consent and female desire appear to be insignificant. In discussing the sexual approach of their husbands, many women used exactly the same description: "he is like an animal". This phrase firstly expresses the feeling of dehumanisation experienced by women in sexual relations with their husbands. Secondly it reflects the husbands self-centred gratification of his libido. Sexuality is often used as a means of expressing male power and as a medium of violence. Thus there is a complex relationship between violence, sexuality and hierarchical power relationships in abusive marriages.

### 3. Female Identity, Religion and Socialisation

The next major theme that emerged from the interviews related firstly, to battered women's constructions of their religious identity and secondly, to the impact of social forces on their identity. The question of female identity is central to understanding both the reasons why women stay in abusive

relationships as well as the impact of socio-religious processes.

### 3.1. Female Religious Identity: Domesticity and Sexuality

The perception of female religious identity by one interviewee is expressed in the following manner :

A good Muslim woman, especially a married one, would bring up her children in the proper Islamic way, giving them the right Islamic education as well as other general education, and obviously she should live like a good Muslim woman, especially when she is married...I mean like sexually she has to be true and faithful to her husband (Jaynub)

Jaynub's construction of the ideal Muslim woman ironically echoes the definitions of a "good woman" (*qānīnāt*) as described by classical medieval scholars. She suggests that the central characteristics of a "good Muslim woman" is determined by the nature of her domestic relationships, as mother and as sexual partner. Significantly, women's identity is mediated through other people, that is, both the salient elements of her religious identity are relational and contingent on either children or husband. She makes no reference to an autonomous religious identity, one independent of the domestic sphere. This corroborates another of Belotti's findings (1975:27) on female socialization which states that women's identities are essentially relational and always facilitating the needs of others. Women, she argues, are valued and value themselves in terms of their service to others (Ibid).

One half of the interviewees responded to questions about their Muslim identity by linking religious identity to their mode of dress. Accordingly, a good Muslim woman was perceived as one who covered her hair and dressed appropriately. One interviewee stated that she would like to start "living in the way of a proper Muslim by wearing a scarf, and dressing properly". Then she added that it also included praying 5 times a day. The implication was that "proper Muslim" female conduct was primarily centred around the body. The God-believer imperative as represented by prayer was a secondary consideration in the construction of female religious identity, preceded by rituals around the body. This emphasis on the appropriate physical presentation as intrinsic to Muslim female identity suggests a continuity of meaning from the dominant medieval religious discourses of the religiously 'appropriate' feminine. It also reflects patriarchal socialisation processes which cause women to internalise the concept of an 'embodied' religious morality.

The impact of sexuality on socio-religious identity was apparent in the interview with Fatima. In her case it is evident that the social and religious norms prioritise virginity as the primary virtue for unmarried women. She discussed the reason her parents provided when she was pressured into marriage as a young student:

As a young Muslim girl my parents feared for me...I suppose its natural for any parent to fear for their daughters. But I still feel that they knew what kind of person I was, and that I could look after myself, like you know, I was never really interested in boys, I was more interested in my studies (Fatima).



From this description it becomes apparent that there is parental anxiety concerning the regulation of female sexuality. That anxiety turns into a fear which expresses itself in religious terms. Fatima remorse and indignation is directed at both her parents refusal to recognize her commitment to her studies and their incapacity to entrust her with the agency to "look after" herself, that is, to preserve her chastity. While she felt the need to give education a priority, her parents felt that marriage was a greater priority. Irrespective of the attempts that women make to enter and thrive in the spheres of intellectual achievement, they are ultimately relegated by their families and the broader society to the realms of the sexual and the domestic. This reflects the operation of a gendered mind/body separation.

Shayda tells the story of how female sexuality is religiously and culturally constructed:

There was only one thing I was taught by my mother about sex when I was young. She said that when a man uses you, there's a first time, then he breaks you and he takes your 'izzat (honor) away, so always look after yourself. So I always looked after myself, I never let any boys touch me...he knows that he is the one that took my 'izzat away. I mean I am an Indian girl. You know how strict the Indian community and the Indian culture is, especially where a woman's 'izzat is concerned, where the pride is concerned. My mother brought us up very strict.

The metaphors and sexual imagery employed to describe her domestic sex education reflects the way societal and cultural language constructs and communicates reality. The language is explicitly utilitarian, "uses" and violent, "breaks". Women are

depicted as essentially a means to satisfy male sexual desires. The religious definition of women's "honor" (*‘izzat*) and worth depends on how well she preserves her sexual innocence for her husband. Shayda defines herself by the norms of "Indian culture" which emphasises the importance of virginity (*‘izzat*) for an unmarried woman.<sup>6</sup> She makes a strong connection between "Indian" cultural understandings and the socio-religious construct of honor (*‘izzat*). The transmission of oppressive self-understandings of female worth from mother to daughter indicates the psychological impact of patriarchy on the minds of its survivors.

### 3.2. Gendered Power Dynamics and Socialisation

The notion of female obedience as discussed in the exegetical literature finds an extraordinary parallel in the women's self-perceptions. This is articulated by Jaynub as follows:

Islamically you are brought up to be obedient as a girl, taught to make "*ṣabr*", so I took the beatings as much as could...and finally when I couldn't take it anymore I did run to my parents home. My mother used to tell me to go back and me being the obedient child use to listen and go back...as for my father, when I go home he never ever wants to know what's going on in my marriage. Even now when I go home with a problem he walks past like he doesn't hear me, like he doesn't want to hear me and he doesn't want to listen (Jaynub).

One sees that it is not only within the medieval textual world that the "religious woman" is constructed as obedient and patient

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<sup>6</sup>. There is little, if any, parallel cultural association of male virginity with "*‘izzat*" or his value.

in relation to her husband. Jaynub's own self-understanding appears to be informed by religion which positions her as obedient, submissive and an emotional minor. Islamic ideals of "ṣabr" (literally: endurance or patience) translates into her initial tolerance of the abuse. Furthermore, although she is a adult married woman, she still refers to herself as the "obedient child". Her mother, despite maternal anguish, directs her daughter to return to the marital relationship. By this maternal recommendation the legitimacy and the normality of an abusive situation is reinforced. Religious understandings which construct female obedience and submissiveness as ideal, practically result in women internalising and colluding, perhaps unconsciously, with the abusive power relations of patriarchy. The expectation that women are to be obedient reinforces the point made by Oduyoye that "any culture that expects women to be silent, to accept subordinate roles and subordination is a violent culture" (1992:12).

The father's "deafness" and silence in this situation also functions to legitimate the violence. Any support for his daughter may be understood to disrupt the authority structures which he is more broadly invested in as a male. On the other hand, he may be powerless since he has relinquished control to the other male, the husband. His silence may also indicate a refusal to assume responsibility against the violence perpetrated against his daughter. While there may be a complexity of factors

motivating the responses of Jaynub's parents, in practical terms she is receiving very little support from her family in terminating the abusive relationship. Her experience problematises the notion that one's parents home is always a place of safety and support.

Many of the other interviewees also pointed out their family's silent complicity with the abuse. This is illustrated in the following excerpts:

After the abuse when I went back to my family's home, he would come to my mother and apologise for his behaviour. She would say to him "Come and sit here". She said that he is another person's child and she will always listen to him. That was the problem as well, she shouldn't have done that. If that happened to my daughter, I won't say come and sit down here, I'll really give it to him. That's the problem, it was almost like he was encouraged (Jaynub).

Anisa said:

I used to feel anger inside me when he use to come to my people and they all talked to him so nicely to him and they forgot what he's done and what he is doing to me. I used to ask them "why are you so nice to him and you don't even ask him why he is doing that to your daughter?" They did nothing at all!

The families in these cases do not reprimand the batterer or subject him to be accountable for his behaviour. Social units like the family thus, consciously and unconsciously, collude in maintaining the violence of patriarchy. In this study it became evident that this obvious lack of support and alienation of the battered woman was pervading.

In Jaynub's experience her ex-husband's family was equally unsupportive. She said:

When his family lived with us for a short period, he once picked up a chair to hit me in front of them all and they gave way. I'm telling you they gave way so that he could hit me more!. But when him and his brother wanted to fight, then the whole family pulled them away from each other, but do you think they pulled him away from me? No! They didn't care about me !

The family does not tolerate violence between males as a means of resolving conflict. They actively intervene to stop the violence between the brothers. In principle, they do not seem to find violence as an acceptable form of conflict resolution. However, in the case of the same man battering his wife, the family makes no attempt to intervene. This position of non-interference in marriages appears to be underpinned by two particular social beliefs. Firstly, the wife "belongs" to the husband. She is "his property" and thus he can do whatever he wishes with her. Secondly, the marital relationship is private and not open to "outside" intervention. These beliefs are premised on an understanding of women as objects, less human, and always as minors who are subject to their husbands' authority.

It is not only the family that is partisan towards the husband. Law enforcement authorities tend to display a similar bias towards the husband. While police would as a matter of duty intervene in cases where civilians assault each other, they have often refrained from doing so where the civilians happen to be spouses. The survivors' experiences with the police is captured

in the words of Anisa:

I used to run to the police station, they used to come and give him a warning, all they say is "it's a domestic affair and it's not our problem", and then I told them "you people say it's a domestic affair, but the day I'm going to kill him, then you not going to say it's a domestic affair. Then it's going to be self-defence and then you are going to say it's a murder case, but now you say it's a domestic affair." Unfortunately the police are another big problem, we have (Anisa).

The police's approach of non-interference in the "domestic problems" of the family is based on a separation between the personal and political (Faragher 1985:118-122). Depoliticisation of violence against wives in the sphere of their homes ultimately legitimises such violence. Social structures and authorities operate from patriarchal understandings of the "private family" and hence collude in maintaining the silence around wife-battery.

### 3.3. Psychological Impact of Violence

Violence has severe psychological repercussions on the battered woman. Most women state that it has an impact on their personalities, self-perception and interactions with other people. Some of interviewees' views are recorded below:

My friends and sister have said to me "You used to be such a vivacious person." I really used to be sparkling. I had so much on the go and I was so confident about life and everything. And then after the marriage they just said to me "We've watched you, parts of you just die off, year by year, you're like a shadow of what you used to be" (Tasneem).

With the continuous violence, I just went into my own world, just depressed, you just don't talk to anybody,

you do your own thing, I was hospitalised for a month because of depression (Fatima).

The way I used to feel in the beginning, it's almost like you don't feel human anymore, you feel empty, you don't feel like living, you don't know why you are existing. It's like your dignity is taken away from you by the beating (Anisa).

It is evident that the violent lifestyle infuses the existential state and identity of the battered woman. It affects her interactions with people, her sense of her own humanity and her self-perceptions. The experience of violation is not limited to the physical but pervades her entire self-understanding. The battered woman "does not feel human anymore" (Anisa). The impact of the violence is a complete negation of her humanity. Physical and psychological abuse are intricately related.

Many of the interviewees described the personal impact of the violence in very similar language. Farida said:

I became very depressed in that violent lifestyle, it made me a very different person. I wasn't very nice to other people. I became a very hard person inside. It changes your personality, you know. Now that I have been out of it for a while I am different again, I'm softer, I've changed towards my children as well, I am more patient...the main reason I left was because of my children. I couldn't let them go through that anymore.

Maryam stated:

Now even when he touches me, I just feel cold. I never respond to him. I was never like that before, it's the way he made me with all the pain and the violence. You know it's funny how a woman can change.

With both these women the feeling of being "changed" and "hardened" by the violent relationship indicates the degree of

emotional and psychological violation. As a result of violence, the emotions of love and "softness" are eroded. This suggests that the emotional capacity of the survivor is damaged. Despite the deep levels of personal violation, many of these survivors remained in the marital relationship for years before leaving. This was seen to be partly influenced by particular social structures including normative perceptions of marriage.

### **3.4. Marriage and Female Identity**

The reasons many interviewees provided for staying within a violent relationship were related to their understanding of marriage as a sacrosanct and permanent institution. Religion played an important role in defining the marital bond:

You know the only thing that we were taught Islamically is that when you get married you stay married, which is why I developed all this guilt because I was brought up this way, that as a woman you stay married irrespective of what (Fatima).

Here it is evident that religious socialisation teaches woman that they must stay married irrespective of the hardships they may encounter. While theoretically Islamic marriage is a contract and not a sacrament, many Muslim women see divorce as religiously improper. This contributes to the reluctance of these women to leave abusive relationships. The belief in sustaining a marriage irrespective of the circumstances is also related to other social, economic and personal implications of marriage to women. Tasneem reflects on the complex pressures to stay married:



When one is married, particularly as a wife there's a sense of, the feeling of being together, and socially you are understood as a unit, and one has one's identity like that and now that I have a child, and a home and responsibilities, its so much more difficult to extricate myself.

For many women their psychological and social identity is informed by the institution of marriage. They derive self-worth from their status as married women and also gain social acceptability.

Since the role of "wife" penetrates deeply into women's self-understanding, a potential break-up is deeply threatening to the self. This experience is captured in the words of Tasneem: "The breaking up of my marriage feels like a huge death....". The need to stay married despite abuse feeds off the need to maintain a sense of identity at various levels. This leads to the issue of whether battered women who have been subject to immense psychological and physical trauma still posses the capacity for agency.

### **3.5. Religion and Female Agency**

In this study, battered women have challenged the legitimacy of marital violence in Islamic terms. The following example illustrates such a case.

After he hits me, he doesn't even say "I am sorry for the way I hit you." He just goes on to ask Allah ma'af (forgiveness). I say 'how can you ask Allah ma'af when you didn't even ask me ma'af? You think Allah will

accept your ma'af, he won't accept it! (Shayda).

This woman does not believe that God will accept the forgiveness of an abuser whose actions illustrate non-repentance. Speaking from her experience, she seeks the ethical voice of justice and fairness in Islam which holds oppressors accountable for their actions. She prioritises the liberatory spirit of Islam by asserting that God takes her humanity seriously enough so as not to forgive one who consistently and deliberately violates her. Other interviewees also problematised the abuse and violence as unIslamic:

When I ask him "How can you hit me and then go to the mosque and pray?", then it ends up with him hitting me again for just saying that because it hurts him (Farida).

As the years went by, I could never get myself to make *salāt* (prayer) with this man. I couldn't let him stand in front of me (i.e. lead me in prayer), knowing that he is not a leader that I could respect, not even as a husband...and it's just because he ill-treats me so badly...(Fatima).

There's a lot of things that I never knew about marriage, not to say that I want to be on top of my husband. I mean Islamically that isn't right, but a woman also has certain rights you know. A husband just can't be right at all times, whether he's wrong he must just be right? (Shamima).

None of these women believed that the violence of their husbands could be condoned by religion. They assumed the right to interrogate the abuser on the very basis of religion. Battered women in these instances perceive their husbands behaviour as inconsistent with the spirit of religion. Even if they

internalised and accepted the prevailing androcentric discourse, they were clearly resistant to the notion that abuse was consistent with Islam. The above quotations illustrate the womens' capacity to transcend patriarchal religious socialisation and instead engage with the ethical voice of Islam.

A more ambiguous response to the impact of religious understandings is evident in Maryam's comment:

I accept Islam and I respect it very much as my religion. So Islam is not the excuse just because these men have got Muslim names and use Islam for their own purposes ...it's an individual person himself actually that is to blame. But I will think twice before I marry a Muslim man again...maybe it's the way we are brought up in a Islamic culture. At work I've heard the white girls speak of their husbands, how they work together, how they respect each other and how they help one another, while both are working...we don't get that support from our Muslim men, for Muslim men their wives... we are like maids, we are like slaves.

This woman sees the dissonance between Islam and the practices of Muslim men.<sup>7</sup> While she embraces Islam as her religion, she is extremely dubious of the practices of Muslim men. She attributes the marital power imbalances partially to religious socialisation and "Islamic culture". Her exposure to non-Muslims ("Whites") and her admiration of their marital relationships being based on mutuality, shared responsibility and partnership is starkly juxtaposed by her personal experience of male domination in marriage.

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<sup>7</sup>. The dichotomy between Islam and the practice of Muslim men is also echoed in the views of Middle Eastern Muslim women as discussed in chapter one.

Another interviewee stated:

Muslim men, especially religious ones have the idea that they are above women, but it is also the kind of person I am. I am very proud of being Muslim although I am not a very religious Muslim (Farida).

In this women's experience Muslim men assume that they are superior to women. It is particularly revealing that she says "especially religious" men assume that they are "above" woman. On the basis of patriarchal male articulations of Islam, hierarchical modes of gender relations are viewed to be religiously normative. When Farida refuses to accept these norms she considers herself not to be "very religious". In her self-understanding, her rejection of male generated norms places her outside the realm of religiosity. Paradoxically, she feels proud of her Muslim identity and yet is personally unable to accept hierarchical religiously gendered constructs. This dissonance appears to be a pervading dilemma of the female experience of Muslim societal practices.

One of the most revealing aspects of women's patriarchal religious socialisation was evident in the discussion with Shamima. She states:

I must try and adapt to him, start living like a proper Muslim, ..he lives like a good Muslim should, and if I live like that too there will be less hassles because I will be praying 5 times a day, and if you do it every day it will be on your mind, and I'll be a different person,...like the hours you pray are not far away from each other and its in your mind and then you say to yourself I shouldn't get angry because I just prayed 5 minutes ago... before I said what I wanted to say and did what I wanted to do, I'll be more careful now,

communication will be better and there will be less violence, but its has got to come from inside of me (Shamima).

Although her husband is violent she still states that "he is a good Muslim" because he prays regularly. She sees no contradiction between his violence and the legitimacy of his supposed religiosity. Thus being "a good Muslim" does not extend to fair and egalitarian human interactions. Abuse and male violence is not seen as inconsistent with being religious. In fact this woman implicitly assumes responsibility for the abuse by saying that if she changed her behaviour and was a better Muslim, there would be less violence. This indicates the belief that good Muslim women are acquiescent, tolerant, and do not express their needs. Women's internalisation of such patriarchal religious constructions weakens their resistance against male violence. Religious identity and religious socialisation are thus intrinsically related to the way in which women conceptualise male violence. A change in gendered religious consciousness is imperative to the ideological and practical empowerment of women.

### **3.6. Battered Women as Agents of Transformation**

Women however do break through sexist stereotypes and display the survival skills and capacities to transform their live and beliefs. One example of female agency is evident in the following case:

You know the first time I retaliated physically was after 15 years of marriage. When he was hitting me with the stick, I grabbed it from his hand and hit him...I was so scared that I had hit him but I realised that when I pulled back and defended myself, he actually backed off, and then I was shocked at myself. I thought 'why didn't I do it long ago because he got scared'. After that I thought to myself, 'now I'm going to put my foot down'. I was nervous and I was scared, and I tried not to show it, and I said to him "Don't ever lift a finger on me again or I'm going to kill you!". I said "Don't ever do it again". And since then he has not done it. Sometimes when I thought he wanted to hit me, I went right up to him and I said "Don't! Don't ever try to do it, I'm going to kill you. Don't try it with me again, you not going to start that nonsense again, I'll kill you." I just say that all the time (Anisa).

This woman tolerated fifteen years of regular beating before she physically challenged her husband's authority. After discovering that her husband was not invincible, she gained the psychological strength to resist the violence. In this instance she maintained her vigilance and the husband never hit her since. It is however important to note that her experience is exceptional. In the experience of other interviewees, a violent reaction on their part only further antagonised their husbands into more extreme and brutal violence.

Another interviewee actively sought out alternative perspectives on women and gender in Islam. Fatima said:

I went to the library and took out these cassettes by Jamal Badawi and he spoke in general about all the rights of Muslim women. I thought 'Gosh ! I do have rights as a Muslim woman', and that also helped in slowly changing my approach and I stopped accepting this relationship.

The women do actively empower themselves and employ religious concepts in rejecting a "victim" status. Empowering and liberatory Islamic constructs provide the resources for female agency and transformation. The related importance of religious socialisation and education is seen by the interviewees as important in the transformation of society.

We need to teach our children to behave differently, my son does domestic chores, when he started to bully my daughter, I stopped him and told him that just because he is a boy does not mean he can treat his sister badly. I always tell the boys that one day when they get married they must never do what their father does to me, it's wrong and very unIslamic (Shayda).

'When we attended Muslim school many years ago we actually learnt very little. We only used to learn Qur'ānic lessons, learnt nothing about marriage. Today, they are very organised, the children learn about marriage, they learn about practical things, how to live like Muslims which is very good and that is why, Inshallah (God willing), our children will be better Muslims and marriages will be much better compared to previously...I feel strongly that it's also the upbringing and some of the things that we were taught as children has got a lot to do with what we are when we are adults and how we conduct our marriages. To me, I still feel marriage is sacred and I try to live within the Islamic way of life where marriage is concerned (Fatima).

These women break out of oppressive stereotypes and teach very different gender relationships to their children. They embrace the potential for transformation in societal and religious constructs. Shayda teaches her children behaviour which rejects sexist role-modelling and aggression. Fatima explicitly argues that religious knowledge will provide the means for transformation in marital gender dynamics. Her view that

religious knowledge provides empowerment for women and protection of correct gender relations resonates the ethical voice of the Qur'an. It is this capacity for female agency that needs to be prioritised in the discourses of liberation. I propose that a commitment to Muslim women's empowerment needs to include a consideration of religious consciousness. Religious consciousness is significantly informed by the perspectives and teachings of dominant religious authorities. The impact of religious authorities in the lives of the battered women interviewed in this study is forthcoming.

#### 4. Religious Authority

The final major theme that emerged from my analysis of the interviews related to the womens' interactions with the religious authorities. The latter were regularly consulted to provide marital conflict mediation. All the interviewees in this study consulted the clergy on different occasions to intervene in their violent marital relationships<sup>8</sup>. In the Western Cape the dominant voice of the religious clergy is epitomised by the Muslim Judicial Council (MJC).<sup>9</sup> They provide religious counselling

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<sup>8</sup>. While Islam does not have an official clergy, the professionalisation of traditional religious learning has effectively resulted in the creation of a clergy class.

<sup>9</sup>. The MJC consists of a group of traditional Islamic scholars who have assumed the mantle of religious leadership in the Western Cape. They have received their traditional Islamic training either locally or at the traditional Islamic institutions in the Middle East or the Indo-Pakistan sub-



services for family and marital problems. Many of the women said that they had approached the *‘ulama* (religious scholars) with the belief that they would protect their rights.

#### 4.1. General Attitude of the Clergy<sup>10</sup>

Some of the interviewees' exchanges with the clergy are recorded in the following comments:

I went to the MJC many times. I use to sit there for hours waiting to see one of them. Finally when they did see me all of those *Imāms* say the same thing "What do you do to make him so angry?"...They always said "you and your husband must come together and you must talk" (Maryam).

I went to the Muslim Judicial Council and Ya Allah (Oh God!), the treatment I got was like I was the culprit I went lots of times, every week was the same thing (Anisa).

The *Imām's* attitude is like I am the one at fault. At the end of the day it was my husband. It's like the violence and abuse meant nothing to them. And it was big thing (Farida).

From the above it becomes evident that the clergy assume that the wife's provocation causes her husband to resort to violence. This attitude places the responsibility and blame for a dysfunctional and violent marriage with the wife. The clergy who act as religious counsellors, do not problematise, challenge or explicitly condemn the husband's use of violence. This implies an

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continent.

<sup>10</sup>. The title "*shaykh*", "*imām*", "*‘ulama*" are used interchangeably among laity to refer to the clerics.

acceptance of male violence as a means of resolving marital conflict. It contributes to the religious ideological structures underpinning and condoning male power and violence. Such a clergy response to male violence only serves to reinforce structural violence against women. Their approach of "blaming the victim" is evident in the following comment of Shayda:

They (the *Imāms*) don't care about the pain and abuse that the women are experiencing because even now, even after all this abuse, this *Imām* said "I am not performing any *ṭalāq*, I'm not doing anything, because I believe in reconciliation." Even after what I told him, even after what he knows I'm going through, what my children are going through, that's the answer I got.

Shayda's experience indicates that there is little serious recognition or sensitivity on the part of this group of clergy to the condition and experiences of many battered women. The summary dismissal of the violence reflects a fundamental non-recognition of the full humanity of women. A worldview which does not categorise the physical violation of a woman as a serious violation of her human integrity is one that does not grant full humanity to women. Trivialisation and silence in response to male violence translates into a discourse of legitimacy. It is principally related to the notion of structural legitimation of violence against women which was discussed more extensively in chapter three.

#### 4.2. Reconciliation Talk

The priority that the clergy places on "marital reconciliation at all costs" emerges as a recurrent theme in the women's experiences. Reconciliation is promoted at the expense of the women's well-being. Interviewees pointed out that during counselling the *Imāms* would constantly canvass and support reconciliation without addressing the abuse that was taking place. This is reflected in the following comments:

All they do is talk, talk, talk. They don't really help me. I thought that if I go there they would help me to solve my problems, but they don't do that. They just talk and try to keep the marriage together irrespective of what was taking place (Farida).

This "reconciliation at all costs" approach protects the sanctity of patriarchal marriages. It also buttresses the popular religious socialisation of women which regards marriage as a sacrament and a permanent union. The clergy's inability to effectively address and redress the abuse of women within marriages is evident in the Shamima's comment:

When we have problems my husband tells them (the *Imam*) what he expects from me and they tell me that I must always do what my husband tells me.

Such clergy attitudes implicitly assumes the ideological posture echoed in sections of medieval Muslim thought which regards women as possessions of men. The clergy promote this religious understanding of male possession which in turn demands female obedience. Women are either inadvertently asked to accommodate the violence against them or are blamed for it. These clergy do

not articulate a categorical indictment of the husband's behaviour since this would threaten the general gender status quo in society and thus undermine male power. Their responses to women and their emphasis on reconciliation is one which stems from the fact that they are all males. Maryam makes the following observation:

You know the problem with these *shaykhs* is that because they are men, they often side with the husband (Maryam).

The clergys' encouragement of marital reconciliation to the battered woman forms part of broader role that they assume as religious counsellors.

#### 4.3. The Therapist-Counsellor Role of the Clergy

The opinion of the interviewees regarding the psychological counselling skills of the clergy is captured in the following description by Anisa:

To tell you honestly, because of all the beating, there's something inside that happened to me...even though there was love originally, that love turns to hatred and disgust and all these horrible feelings towards that person. You just can't help it but when I speak to the *Imam* and I tell him how I feel, he says "Oh, but you musn't say these things, it is not Muslim and it's not Islamically right." Then I tell him "But I'm telling you how I feel. This is how I feel, it's the truth, why must I lie, because that's how I feel and it's this man that's caused this feeling inside." It's just natural I suppose, because the way I've been ill-treated. That's another thing about these *Imams*, I don't know, because I think they not also trained in that way to really help the people (Anisa).

In this excerpt the clergyman's response to the psychological and emotional trauma betrays his lack of compassion and psychological insight. As observed by the interviewee, he shows no capacity to offer therapeutic counselling to a battered woman. Moreover his value judgement on her negative feelings towards her husband is selective. He does not similarly decry and offer negative value judgements on the abusive behaviour of the husband. In fact the clergyman condemns her negative feelings towards the batterer as "unIslamic". He employs religious language to break down and undermine the woman's psychological and emotional resistance to male violence. In this manner he reinforces a violent and misogynistic status quo. This approach also becomes salient in the clergys' mediation of the *nushūz* verse (Q. 4:34) in the context of violent marital relationships.

#### 4.4. The Nushūz in Practice

One of the most explicit connections between Qur<sup>ā</sup>nic verses 4:34 and its application to a discourse of wife-battery is evident in Jaynub's experience:

In times of problems I have told the *Imām* about the way my husband beats me up. They (the clergy) spoke to him and after that he (the husband) told me that the Qur'<sup>ā</sup>n states that he should not lift his hands on his wife, but if his wife doesn't want to listen to him then he is allowed to hit her. Where in the Qur'<sup>ā</sup>n does it state that? I don't believe that it can say that in the Qur'<sup>ā</sup>n, but my husband, after talking to the *Imām* tells me that.

In this instance the authoritative mediators of the Qur'<sup>ā</sup>n i.e.,

the clergy, provide the husband with a religious rationale for his abusive behaviour. Such a reading of Qur'ānic scripture explicitly legitimates violence against wives by their husbands. This clergyman authorises the use of "justifiable violence" against wives. It is an approach which characterises the interpretations of classical exegetes like al-Ṭabarī, al-Rāzī and al-Zamaksharī. The contemporary generation of clergy uncritically adopt these views to support their patriarchal readings of the Qur'ān. Hence it is clear that classical Islamic exegetes have created a tradition of meaning that informs present generations of clergy scholars. In the above example the clergyman's statement to the husband that he may hit his wife when she does not listen to him ignores the ethical voice of the Qur'ān. This has a debilitating, violent and prejudicial impact on the lives of women.

However, a significant point in this quote is Jaynub's refusal to believe that the Qur'ān condones the beating of women. This disbelief is rooted in the fact that she does not view the Qur'ān as a misogynist text. Her view of the Qur'ān emerges from a belief in its ethical value. Moreover, her view represents an understanding of the Qur'ān which emerges from a position of marginality, oppression and weakness. From her particular historical location and experience she pursues the ethical Qur'ānic voice of justice, liberation and transformation. I argue

that it is these voices that need to be heard and prioritised.<sup>11</sup>

Another interviewee also exhibited "clergy-mediated" understandings of the *nushūz* verse when she said:

They (the clergy) say that the Qur'ān says that the husband can hit his wife with the *miswāk*....but I don't accept that. You can't hit your wife with the broom the way he does. He really whips me. That man is cruel, really cruel (Anisa).

It is obvious that Anisa has heard an interpretation of the verses, since the issue of hitting a woman with a *miswāk* (a twig toothbrush) is only mentioned in the exegesis and not in the original Qur'ānic text. She too challenges the understanding that Qur'ān condones violence and cruelty against her.

Yet another interviewee, Fatima, stated that her husband, upon being challenged on battering his wife, explicitly stated that "the Qur'ān allows us to do that to our wives". It is thus evident that the Qur'an has been used by abusive men to support physical violence. While one may agree with Wadud's assertion that "the problem of domestic violence is not rooted in the Qur'ān" (1992:76), these examples highlight that the Qur'ān is

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<sup>11</sup>. The theological commitment to prioritising the voices of the marginalised and the oppressed is also developed extensively in (Christian) Liberation theology and Feminist Liberation Theology. See Sharon Welch's Communities of Resistance and Solidarity: A Feminist Theology of Liberation (1985) and Leonardo Boff's Introducing Liberation Theology (1987).

used retrospectively to legitimate male violence against wives.

I also interviewed a woman who had survived and successfully left a marriage within which she had been battered. She had subsequently trained and become a lay counsellor to other battered women. Her strength, commitment and resilience were remarkable. She had told me:

Recently I gave the Qur'ān as a present to an agnostic friend who was interested in Islam. Before I gave it to her I struck out that verse (Q.4:34.) I did this because I think that this verse is open to misinterpretation. After my experiences I just refuse to accept that Allah allows or condones violence against women.

The obvious pain and sense of betrayal that women experienced at the possibility that there is an interpretive space open in the Qur'ān for the legitimization of violence against women is evident.

#### **4.5. Clergy Collusion in the Disempowerment of Battered Women**

It has thus far become evident that many of the clergy responses to violence against wives exhibits patriarchal bias. Moreover, by using their position as religious authorities, clergy have also been implicated in the more calculated manipulation and active disempowerment of some interviewees. A particularly illustrative example concerns Fatima, whose marriage was performed in accordance with Muslim rites and did not have a legal status in South African Law. Since South African Law did not legally recognize such marriages, she as the mother had sole custody of



the children. In this case Fatima's ex-husband had a history of physical abuse towards the children and she was therefore intent on denying him paternal access to them. The father, together with the *Imām*, drew up legal documents to ensure that the father had visitation and access rights to the children. In pursuit of the husband's cause, the *Imām* visited Fatima and told her that it was Islamically incumbent on her to sign these papers. The following interchange is reported to have taken place:

I told the *Imām* that I don't have to sign that document which also included property rights. He told me "*Sharī'ah* says that the father has rights over the children", and "*Sharī'ah* says this...and *Sharī'ah* says that...." I said "*Sharī'ah* is fine, I'm not arguing with *Sharī'ah*, but I have a valid reason for not wanting to allow him rights to the children. He's the father but he is violent. I'll never sign something like that." This *Imām* just wanted me to sign so then he says to me "Ja jou kop is deurmekaar (lit: your head is confused), kom maak *istikhāra*" (perform your *istikhara* prayer)<sup>12</sup>. I said "Fine, I'll go make *istikhāra*." The next day I phoned him back. I said "Please, throw that document in the dirt-bin, because I didn't sign it." He said "No, but you don't have to sign because your husband signed already and it's legal." How can one partner only have the rights to sign concerning properties and maintenance and custody?! I don't have any rights?! As for the *Imām* how can he, who is supposed to be Islamically inclined help my husband to take away my rights just like that...when I took the document to Lawyers for Human Rights, they said to me that the document was not legal, even if I had signed it was not legal (Farida).

In this case the clergyman exploits his reputed authority of Islamic Law by his references to the "*sharī'ah*" in order to

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<sup>12</sup>. Literally the clergy tells her "You are incapable of thinking clearly and you must perform the '*istikhara*' prayer". The word "*istikhara*" comes from the root word "*khayr*" and means to solicit virtue or goodness. Technically it translates into a prayer for divine good or guidance.

actively disempower the woman. He undermines her judgement by accusing of her of being confused ("deurmekaar" and needing to make "*istikhāra*"). When this attempt at psycho-religious manipulation is unsuccessful, he resorts to dishonesty by saying that the document is legally-binding irrespective of her agreement. There appears to be no concern for the well-being and protection of the children or the women. This case reflects the active collusion of religious authority in the systems of patriarchy.

It is remarkable that Farida, after being subjected to such attempted emotional and religious blackmail, did not succumb to the pressure of the purported religious authority. By claiming that she had no problems with the *Sharī'ah*, she asserted her right to interpret Islamic Law. She resisted male power to exclusively define religious authority. She also questioned the authority of the *Imām* who supposedly represented Islam but actually violated Islamic principles of justice by actively conniving to disempower her.

Farida explained how her rights were protected by the secular legal organisation "Lawyers for Human Rights". She also said that the first time she realized that all the abuse was not her fault was after she went to Rape Crisis. It was this secular feminist organisation that gave her perspective on the issues of wife-battery and that provided her with support. She says:

Everything changed after I went to Rape Crisis. Before that, nothing. I was getting into a bad state, with no support or help from anyone. I also saw this woman at the Muslim Assembly and she asked me what I do to make him so angry and says to me that I musn't do anything to provoke him. So I said to her "Please do me a favour, phone Rape Crisis if you can't go to them. They will tell you about battering husbands. You know you people you want to work in your little circle alone now because you think that you are Muslim and this is Islam. You don't want to get involved in other societies that are also helping people." I said "Talk to them and hear what Rape Crisis has to say about battered women." I got very angry and I think that was when I began to build up courage even to talk. Before I was afraid so I was silent and I accepted everything (Farida).

The experiences of these women are a telling indictment on the Muslim religious institutions and community. As survivors of battery they were subjected to blame, manipulation, deceit and disempowerment by the Muslim clergy. The primary support that was available to them came from secular organisations, namely, Lawyers for Human Rights and Rape Crisis. It is ironic that secular organisations are living out the Prophetic impulse of empowering and supporting the weakest and most oppressed segments of the community, battered women.

#### 4.6. The Alternative Clergy

The interviewees experiences thus far unequivocally point to the androcentric bias of the clergy. They appear to regularly undermine women and contribute to systemic structures of male hierarchy. However there is also evidence of a minority of clergy who have assisted battered women. Maryam recounts the following

experience:

Only recently there was a good *shaykh* that spoke to me. He said that the old people used to always say you must stay married and he said: "No, Islam doesn't say that. The old people misunderstood things and had their own interpretation. If two people are married and they are struggling, and they have no money, its no reason for *talaq*, but in your case it is different". My husband doesn't want to stay right and I'm struggling to keep the marriage together. I'm going backward and I'm getting depressed and miserable and suffering and he said "No it doesn't mean you must stay married in a case like that. Divorce is permissible." This is the only Muslim *shaykh* that has said this to me.

This clergyman very explicitly encouraged the woman to leave an abusive marriage. He delegitimises the patriarchal religious interpretations of traditional structures which requires the woman to remain in an oppressive and dysfunctional marriage. Moreover, he illustrates how particular Islamic interpretations have the inherent potential to serve the needs for empowerment of battered women.

Another interviewee whose abusive husband was having many extra-marital relationships was advised by a clergyperson to leave her husband.

He (the *shaykh*) said that because my husband is beating me and then he messing around with other woman, in the end I am going to sit with Aids. He told me straight to leave the marriage. I don't know what he told my husband (Shayda).

In this instant the clergyperson illustrates an interest for the health and well-being of the battered woman.

While the voice of an egalitarian religious authority is

marginal, it is noteworthy that such clergy do actually exist. This illustrates that there is potential for the transformation of religious authority. This transformation is important since the clergy are generally seen as official mediators of religious meaning, as authoritative interpreters of the Qur'ān and as the definers of the ethical voice of Islam. They are imbued with the power of God-talk and when this God-talk is patriarchal, women are on the receiving end of oppressive power.

## 5. Conclusion .

In sum, this chapter presented a description and analysis of qualitative interviews conducted with battered Muslim women. The common themes that emerged from these interviews were divided into three categories for analysis, namely,

- 1) Violence, Sexuality and Male power.
- 2) Female Identity, Religion and Socialisation.
- 3) Religious Authority.

This chapter illustrated the impact of entrenched religio-gender constructs and dominant Islamic authority on the phenomenon of wife battery in a South African Muslim community.

The impact of religious discourses on the experiences of battered Muslim women is evidently structural as well as practical. There are explicit tensions between Islamic positions which advocate women's empowerment and those which are misogynist and oppressive

to women. However, from the qualitative data it appears that conservative and oppressive positions dominate the interactions of battered Muslim women with the clergy and the broader Muslim community.

The contemporary religious understandings of marriage continue to operate on the presumptions of male control, female obedience and male sexual gratification. When read together with the writings of medieval exegetes there appear to be unmistakeable continuities in their discourses. Such discourses provide ideological legitimacy to violence perpetrated against women. Hence it is apparent that the gender ideology of medieval Islam has not lost its currency in contemporary Muslim consciousness.

Nonetheless the interviews provide evidence of women's resistance to patriarchy at both psychological and socio-religious levels. In psychological terms many of the women defied and transcended their internalised sexist religious constructs. At the socio-religious level these women have challenged the authority of those patriarchal clergy who provided a religious rationale for the violence they experienced. Thus their struggle to overcome the numerous obstacles they encountered reflects their capacity for active agency.

## CONCLUSION

### 1. Summary

Chapter one contextualised my thesis within broader feminist paradigms. Here I examined the ambivalences of this discourse in relation to the third world as well as to the Muslim world(s). Secondly, the chapter described my own context of inquiry, i.e., the South African Muslim community. Here I depicted the converging socio-political and religious dimensions of gender relations in this community. Chapter one therefore framed my approach within a broader body of feminist discourse and contextualised my examination of gender within an Islamic context in general, and the Muslim South African community in particular.

In chapter two I examined the ideological and theoretical assumptions underlying violence against women, particularly against wives. This entailed a two-fold level of analysis. I firstly analysed violence against women at a structural and systemic level. This involved an examination of prevalent gender and socio-cultural constructs which create and reinforce violence against women. Secondly, I focussed on the specific issue of violence against wives by their husbands. Here I surveyed the theoretical literature and research on wife battery. I concluded by examining the relationship between gender ideology, power

relations and violence against wives. I suggested that religion plays an important role at the level of gender ideology.

Chapters three and four formed a conceptual unit in that both chapters provided an analysis of Islamic gender ideology and its implications for violence against women. Both chapters focussed on Qur'ānic exegeses of gender constructs. In chapter three, I examined a selection of medieval Qur'anic exegetical studies relating to the *nushūz* verse (Q.4:34). I applied a critical feminist hermeneutic to the patriarchal gender ideology reflected in these texts.

Chapter four examined contemporary interpretations of gender relations in the Qur'ān. The contextual hermeneutical approach of Fazlur Rahman was presented as an alternative exegetical methodology. This was followed by presenting the exegesis of contemporary Muslim woman exegete, Amina Wadud-Muhsin, on the *nushūz* verse (Q.4:34). I concluded this chapter with my own reflections on a liberatory and transformative Qur'anic gender ideology.

In chapters three and four, I analysed the ideology and politics of interpretation embedded in various readings of gender in the Qur'ān. The analyses focused on the impact of religious constructs on the discourse of violence against wives. These religio-ideological dimensions foregrounded my analysis of



contemporary Muslim society and the experiences of battered Muslim women which was explored in chapters five and six.

Chapters five and six are interrelated. In chapter five I described and explained the research methodology I employed in the process of interviewing battered women. Here I presented the assumptions of feminist qualitative research together with a critique of androcentric positivist research methodology. This was followed by a brief description of the interview process and biographical data of the interviewees.

Chapter six provided a discussion and analysis of the experiences of battered Muslim women as derived from the interviews I conducted. Here the relationship between practical religious discourses on gender and the realities of battered Muslim women were explored. One of the key objectives was to create a space for the articulation of Muslim women's voices. The women's experiences as recorded in the transcribed interviews were analysed for common themes. Three major interrelated thematic categories emerged from this analysis. They were as follows:

- 1) Violence, Sexuality and Male power.
- 2) Female Identity, Religion and Socialisation.
- 3) Religious Authority.

## 2. Concluding Reflections

My central inquiry in this thesis related to the impact of Islamic discourse on violence against wives. It was evident that several interlocking levels or webs of religious discourse shaped the conceptions of violence against wives. Religious symbols are interrelated at the personal, socio-cultural, scriptural and institutional levels. The confluence of these collective symbolic activities contribute to the gendered construction of religious meaning.

I explored the critical position of Qur'ānic exegesis as the signifier of dominant religious consciousness of Muslim communities. This was examined with particular relevance to the issue of gender ideology. In my examination of the medieval Qur'ānic exegetical literature on the *nushuz* verse (Q.4:34) there were a number of salient implications in relation to religious discourses of violence against women. Classical medieval interpreters mediated this verse through the lenses of their particular socio-cultural gender norms. Their patriarchal and frequently misogynist ideologies framed their dichotomous conceptualisation of humanity. This worldview of inherent and fundamental differences between men and women was firstly, structurally violent in terms of its rigidly hierarchical gender

constructions and norms. Secondly, it explicitly facilitated the beating and physical violation of the "disobedient" woman (*nāshiza*). The implication is that the dominant voice of Islamic legacy entrenched misogyny and violence against women. The ethical voice of Islam appears to have been marginalised.

My exploration of the contemporary exegetical tradition revealed that there are alternative egalitarian and liberatory Qur'ānic definitions of humanity and gender relations. Using the exegetical studies of contemporary scholars Fazlur Rahman and Amina Wadud-Muhsin, I argued that the *nushūz* verse (Q.4:34) represents the pragmatic perspectives of the Qur'ān. As such it reflects the socio-cultural norms of marital hierarchy and misogyny which were practised in the Qur'anic revelatory context. I argued that the applicability of such a verse was historically contingent and does not reflect the eternal ethical principles of the Qur'an. Rather, I proposed that the ethical vision of the Qur'an is reflected in verses which project the development of society based on mutuality, human dignity, egalitarianism, and justice. Furthermore, the spirit and ethical impetus of the Qur'an is wholly incompatible with the beating and violation of women by men, or the abuse of any human being. The tensions between patriarchal and egalitarian Qur'anic interpretations have a significant impact on the discourses of violence against women in Muslim societies.

In terms of my qualitative empirical research, I found that contemporary religious understandings influenced and shaped the perceptions and experiences of battered Muslim women. The role of the authoritative socio-cultural mediators of Islam, i.e., the clergy, was significant in this regard. It was evident that the clergy's power to define and control religious symbols and religious knowledge translates into the power of defining and imparting "truth". They have presented their subjective reflections and interpretations as uncontested authoritative understandings of Islamic knowledge and religious "truth". The definition, control and monopoly of truth is instrumental in negotiating and structuring power relations, including gender relations. By and large the contemporary clergy in South Africa used religious symbols to reinforce patriarchal gender relations. Moreover, they implicitly and explicitly supported the "rights" of the husband to control and coerce his wife, even if this meant the use of violence. There was no evidence to suggest that they problematised or challenged the physical violation of women by their husbands. Thus they were complicit in maintaining religious discourses which facilitate violence against women.

It was evident from the interviews with battered Muslim women that religious and socio-cultural beliefs socialise women into accepting and internalising patriarchal gender definitions. Nonetheless many interviewees challenged, defied and resisted these sexist religious constructs, albeit ambivalently. They

struggled to overcome both internal and external obstacles to the recognition of their full humanity. This was especially evident in those cases where battered women searched for alternative interpretations of Muslim women's rights to empower themselves.

Battered Muslim women's search for the ethical vision of Islam emerges from the experience of their marginality, weakness, violation and oppression. The tension between the battered women's positioning as transformative agents on the one hand, and powerless victims of a violent sacralised patriarchy on the other, defines the nature of many interviewees' experiences.

Thus there are many socio-cultural and religious influences which coalesce to make up the complex and intricate mosaic of Islamic gender constructs. These in turn inform an "Islamic" response to phenomenon of violence against women. When these religious understandings of gender relations are misogynist, the resultant practical implications in the lives of battered Muslim women are hugely debilitating, as is evident in this thesis. In order to challenge the definitions of these religious power-brokers who have contributed to the making of a patriarchal Islam, it is vital to create alternative egalitarian perspectives. The empowerment of women in the areas of religious knowledge and alternative religio-gender constructions is vital to the transformation of contemporary Muslim society.

### 3. The Significance of this Study.

This thesis is intrinsically ambitious. It is ambitious because the focus of my study by its very nature covers vast and intersecting disciplines. In choosing to do feminist Islamist research on "battered women in Muslim communities" there is an inevitable overlap of various bodies of knowledge. These include the disciplines of Islamic and religious studies, women's studies, sociology, psychology, social work, secular and Islamic law. While my primary aim was to focus on the dialectical relationship between religious (Islamic) discourse and the constructions of gender, the research topic inevitably traverses the broader contours of social science.

I have provided an overview of central issues and debates in the various disciplines, for example, the debates in western and third world feminisms, and the psycho-sociological theories of wife battering. Nonetheless, it was unavoidable and perhaps necessary for the purposes of cohesiveness and containment, that these debates are not exhaustively presented. It was my intention however, to provide an academic perspective which represents the complexities and interweaving nature of the human experience. This inevitably requires an interdisciplinary approach to the study of the human phenomenon.

Part of the significance of this thesis is its interdisciplinary

approach to the study of Islam. It was also my objective to raise critical questions regarding the relationship between Islam, gender and society. This thesis makes a contribution in the following ways. Firstly, it offers a critical and explicitly feminist engagement with classical Islamic exegetical studies (*tafāsīr*).<sup>13</sup> Secondly, it examines the influence of religious discourses of violence against women in a South African Muslim community and provides an avenue for the expression of Muslim women's experiences. Thirdly it contributes to Women's Studies by providing a feminist examination of Muslim society which is based on the expression of the authentic voices of Muslim women.

To conclude on a personal note: my personal conviction and commitment to the unconditional, absolute and living Islamic imperative of social justice provides the impetus for this research. It is for me very much "passionate" and "engaged" scholarship (Reinharz 1992:181). I am therefore unapologetic about my religious and ideological positions as a committed Muslim feminist.

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<sup>13</sup>. Gender as a central category for analysis in Islamic scholarship is a relatively recent development. The work of Wadud-Muhsin (1992) and Ahmed (1992) represent such a development in Islamic scholarship.

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